

THERE LAY THE CITY

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DON'T RUN AWAY
IT IS BECAUSE I BELIEVE IN YOU
BUT IF TODAY I BELIEVE IN MYSELF
I DO NOT KNOW OF THE MORROW,
AND WANT TO STAY
NOW I HAVE CLEARED MY AIMLESS WANDERING
SOMETIMES ACCOMPANIED, SOMETIMES MUCH ALONE
I HAVE TRAVELED A LONG WAY,

I HAVE TRAVELED A LONG WAY,
SOMETIMES ACCOMPANIED, SOMETIMES MUCH ALONE
NOW I HAVE CEASED MY AIMLESS WANDERING
AND WANT TO STAY.

I DO NOT KNOW OF THE MORROW,
BUT IF TODAY I BELIEVE IN MYSELF
IT IS BECAUSE I BELIEVE IN YOU
DON'T RUN AWAY

*The characters in this book including
the "I" are entirely fictitious, and any
resemblance to persons, living or dead, is
purely coincidental*

CHAPTER ONE

I HELD her in my arms even before I knew her name

Not really, because we were dancing and at Maxine's you found your partner from among the girls, who sat in a line in one corner of the room and who got up when you went over and bowed. She danced well, and for a girl who probably danced all day, she retained her enthusiasm for dancing. As my hand rested on the curve of her back, I could feel the moist sweat which penetrated her blue, printed cotton dress. Now and again, she would leave my hand and dab her little handkerchief to her face. "Sorry", she would say, "it's so warm". And she would put her handkerchief back into the front of her dress in that natural pocket between the blue, printed cotton flock and the curve of her breasts.

We stopped as the record played out and I mopped my brow. Enthusiastically she clapped her hands as we waited for an encore. The records changed and the music began once again. Now and then, she would break away from me and do a little strut on her own and bite her lower lip and clap her hands, and come back to me almost with a bump. "So you

saluted him as he saluted no other occupant of the house

Maxine arranged the records and switched on a little light and a sign on the wall flashed and spelt out "Quick Step", and the men stirred in their places and cast their glances around, and as the needle touched the edge of the record, they sprang from their chairs and were bowing to the twelve little girls across the room. And so the dance began, and on the polished floor the feet shuffled and the dancers wizzed past the room to the quick, hot rhythm of the music. And Maxine turned to me, his arms folded, leaning on his great-big, polished radiogram and said "Not dancing? Left out, eh?"

"I am sitting it out till your music cools down," I replied

"I'll play tangos next. That's cool enough, ain't it?"

"Fine", I answered, but my attention was elsewhere and my eyes were roving round the room, following the little girl in the blue, printed cotton dress. Now and again when she passed me, she would look over her partner's shoulder and smile, though I wasn't quite sure what that smile meant.

"Dance much?" Maxine spouted again and then "There ain't no place here. No girls here, *mun*. Out where I was, there are hundreds. What girls, *MUN!*"

"And where was that?" I had to ask

"Bangalore, *mun*. On two hundred you can live there like a bloomin' rajah. Cheap,—drinks and

dancing with you " " And then, quickly she corrected herself " "It's not that you are a good dancer, but you don't pull me round It's restful for a change "

" I think you are the one who jumps about," I retorted, remembering her side steps and the way she flung herself out and bit her lower lip and clapped her hands

" Maybe, but that's because I like dancing with you " " But what she said didn't make sense anyway

" What's your name ? " I suddenly thought of asking

" Dee "

" D ? "

" Uh-huh "

" Just D ? "

" They call me Dee It's short for Judy ", she replied as she tucked her nose into the lapel of my coat and grazed it against the laundered silk finish " You can call me Judy No one else does "

" Alright——Judy "

I liked dancing the tango the way I danced the tango I hated jostling about as did those young fellows, who had just joined the Army, and who danced with hulking, great dames on Friday nights at the Taj Equally did I detest the way little Anglo-Indian boys swung their partners round on Saturday nights, and affected languid poses to keep time to the long drawn strains I had never been to a school for lessons in dancing I just liked moving to that music Now and again, I felt hot breath on my

He wore patent-leather shoes

He told me it was because they were soft, and his feet were his living, but he never explained why they were pointed like a sharp pencil or polished to look like a shining black mirror His attitude towards life was characterised by his folded arms and that was the one time he looked natural, because his mind was blank—completely blank except for that castle on the Hudson down south in Bangalore

But the pictures of him that hung on the walls of his class were different They portrayed him with his left leg out, pivoting his partner in some dancing competition and in the foreground was the silver cup he had won—for slow foxtrot, for the waltz, for the tango, the rumba—for anything that came in as dancing Out in Bangalore he was king-man among the dancers and no one, who didn't know Maxine, knew anything about dancing

That is also why Maxine hated the great city In it he was lost Like a pebble on the beach he was trodden upon by a whole host of people, who walked over him and by him, and never cared who he was That hurt him most, the obscurity to which he had been condemned after having been for years in the spotlight And it hurt him even more when he realized that he had chosen so to humiliate himself because, as he said "You've got to have dough" That's why he pushed women around all day, teaching them to dance

One, two, three turn, one, two, three turn

From ten in the morning to seven at night he kept repeating these words except at lunch and that wasn't for long

Maxine had a distinguished clientele, for he only advertised in the *Anglo-Indian Times*, and his pupils, too, felt at ease with him knowing that their husbands would never object to the efflorescent, artistic presence of Maxine or to the perfectly proper way in which he conducted himself

So that when Maxine said "That's all, folks", his day's work was over and the clock had struck twelve. Then he moved over to his table at the door and opened his cash box, and as the crowd moved out the girls one by one stopped by and he gave them a packet in which rustled three rupee notes. Each girl would say "Thank you" and he'd reply "Good night," and that was all

I was one of the last to leave, and just a little ahead of me was Judy. She never turned round though. She collected her packet and moved out of the room and down the stairs where groups of men were waiting to take someone home. With great dignity she descended the stairs—one by one—not flustered, not hurried. At the end of the first flight, some men gathered round her and I leant over the banisters to see what was happening. I heard her say over their hushed rumblings "No, thanks, I've got a lift home", and she moved down with the crowd of men around her thinning as she stepped unconcernedly to the entrance below. Then, for a

moment, she paused, and looked around as if her car hadn't yet arrived. She looked up the stairs and caught my eye and I thought she smiled, but wasn't sure. Then she jumped over the few stone steps at the entrance and disappeared into the night.

I moved down and into my two-seater car. It was really more than a two-seater, for three sat in front and two in the dickey, but it came under two-seaters and you called it so. It was the sort of car that answered to a Freudian complex—the sort of car Maxine felt he should have but didn't—the sort of car I had bought but which no one else would ever buy. It was long and black and had a bonnet which might have had a bee in it. It shot past most things on the road—all except those little Baby Austins which it felt too ashamed to overtake. It was so big you really didn't know what to do with it in those tiny parking spaces they marked out for you—the complete antithesis to "multum in parvo."

I moved out of the little side-street of Maxine's, turned the corner and stepped on the gas. As I swung round into the main street, the head-lights fell on the blue, printed cotton dress as it moved along—alone in the night. I slowed down, and coming close to her said "Got a lift home?" She stopped, opened the door of the car, and in a moment was beside me in the black two-seater. As I moved on again she broke the silence with "Yes, thank you, I got a lift home!" She laughed as she had done before and all over again. I laughed too, if only because I knew she

wanted me to And the big black two-seater moved along

“ Where to, now ? ” I asked after a while

She looked at me from the corner of her eye, as much as to say, she had heard that sort of question before So I repeated “ Where to ? ”

“ Home,” she replied emphatically

“ Alright,” I replied, “ you don’t have to be grumpy about it I can’t give you a lift without knowing where you want to be dropped Where does home mean ? ”

She laughed at my shortness, tugged at my coat-sleeve as my hand grasped the steering wheel

“ Give me a cigarette first,” she said

I dipped into my hip pocket and produced my case I brought out my lighter and gave them both to her to help herself And I drove on towards the Fountain, where I slowed down and asked for direction She pointed towards the right and I turned till I came again to the main cross road and waited for more direction She had by then lit her cigarette and returned my belongings to me From her direction I found I had entered the Drive and she pointed towards the long stretch that led to the Hill A strange address, I thought, for a girl who made a living dancing in Maxine’s class But I drove on without a word, stepping on the accelerator till the needle touched forty, fifty, sixty The black two-seater ate up the road and the lamp-posts passed by us in rapid succession Half-way down the drive she

tugged at my sleeve again, and said "Are you in a hurry?"?

"No, not particularly"

"Then don't drive so fast I like it slow, so that I can watch the stars, and know I won't crash watching them I like watching stars"

Her head was thrown right back and her legs stretched out and her one hand was behind her head, holding her long black straight hair, and in the other she held her cigarette and occasionally she pulled down the skirt of her blue, printed cotton dress

I slowed down My annoyance had likewise subsided I turned to look at her Her face was in repose and shone a little in the bright moonlight Her white nose was silhouetted against the dark blue of the sky Her little chin, her whole profile made a pretty picture She was different from what she had looked at Maxine's Her lips were thin and I had not noticed the colour of her eyes Her whole figure was slight, delicate but not too frail, supple, feminine, attractive but not accentuated by sex She looked more the sort of girl who would cuddle up beside you and fall asleep because she was tired, rather than the type you wanted only to undress

"Where do you live Judy?" I asked after a while

"Down the Causeway," she unconcernedly replied

"Down the Causeway! That happens to be in the other direction, or am I really going a little soft in the head? I thought you wanted to go home—straight home"

"I did—by and by But I like looking at stars It takes me away from myself, even for a while "

I let her speak, for as she talked, she seemed to feel happier for it

"Ever felt you want to run away from yourself?" she continued and when I didn't answer, she added "No, maybe you like to be yourself and perhaps you are content with what you are I suppose you have no reason to complain "

"Have you ? "

"No—not really, nothing to complain of Just want to be different, that's all A feeling of wanting to get somewhere "

"Where ? "

"That I don't know Oh! Don't be silly You know what I mean I think you get a kick out of teasing others You're sensitive—annoyed because I didn't flatter your vanity—like all the others—I expect "

I couldn't help smiling but didn't say a word

"Yes," she said with utter coldness, "I know your type You don't rush Too conceited, but all the time you know it'll come "

"You haven't got a high opinion of me, have you ? "

"I don't know you enough "

"But you know so much about me "

"Am I wrong ? "

"How should I know ? Besides, does it matter ? "

"No, I suppose it doesn't—not really. Nothing matters. That's the pity of it. Nothing matters."

We got to the end of the Drive and I slowed down and asked "Straight on?"

"No, let's turn. It's so late and I want to get some sleep."

"Working?" I asked.

"Always working, I suppose."

"Where?"

She turned sharply round, and looked at me and kept looking while I turned the car and drove back

"Aren't you going to tell me?" I repeated.

"Don't ask questions—please."

"Sorry," I said and got dumb again and stepped once again on the accelerator. I drove hard for a while till she moved nearer to me, took my arm in hers and softly said "A little slowly—please. There's much I want to live for yet, and I am always scared I won't live that long."

"You'll live," I grunted, "don't worry." And then feeling a bit of a cad, I added "Why shouldn't you?"

"You don't like me," she added after a pause, "do you?"

"I don't know you enough" I repeated her words.

"Would that make a difference?"

"What?"

"Knowing me enough?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Never mind," she added and gripped my arm and held it tightly and then let it go, sliding back into the far corner of the car as if she wanted to be all alone

"You're a funny girl," I said at last, my voice sounding a little friendly

"You're funny too," she grunted

We drove back along the Drive, turned the corner and past the row of houses that had been newly built As she directed me I went down towards the Causeway, creeping along the tram lines till opposite an unelegant block of flats she made me stop

"I live here," she said with a ring of certainty in her voice

"How nice," I fatuously remarked

"Nice or not nice, I live here just the same," she added as she got down from the car and leant on its door "Good night and thanks for the lift"

"Not at all——"

"Don't look so chivalrous about being bored"

"Bored? Why do you say that? I want to know if I'll see you again"

"Maybe"

"Alright—may be," I said putting the car in gear and raising the engine slightly to indicate a desire to move on

"You are not going to knock me down, are you?"

"No, but I think I'll say good-night"

"Come again to Maxine's sometime—when you haven't got anything better to do"

"Maybe," I replied with a look of triumph on my face, having made the obvious retoit

Then without any warning whatsoever she moved to the front of the car, looked at something there and darted into the house leaving me dumbfounded and alone in the black two-seater

I shrugged my shoulders and drove home. The last thing I remember saying to myself that night in bed was "Funny girl!" And as I tucked myself in, I thought also of the post card I had received that morning—an unsigned, anonymous post card from England, but I knew from whom it came, for it was the message the good Father Dominic had promised to send me when his work was done

CHAPTER TWO

I LIVED at the other end of town at the top of a two-and-a-half storeyed building Two-and-a-half was significant, because where I lived or "dug" was the odd half—a sort of after-thought that had been begun but never properly finished The landlord was a moody fellow who could not make up his mind and when I rented the semi-roof-flat he explained the circumstances in which it was built "The original idea," he explained to me at that time, "was to provide a retreat for myself from my families "

" Families ? " I had asked

" Yes, I have two wives I gave marriage a double trial We marry twice and even thrice or more, you know "

" Of course," I replied, as if it was a custom with which I was also familiar

" It's allowed in the Koran," he added to allay any doubts I may have entertained on the subject of bigamy

" Yes, yes, I know," I smilingly said

" Well," he added, " it didn't work It was not as if they were jealous of each other I would have

understood jealousy. But their attitude was more of joint property owners and if I was not with one, I was rebuked for not being with the other. And a man has got to be alone sometimes. So I thought I'd build a third storey all for myself—for my men friends who sometimes came to play cards—just to be alone, you know. But with the two of them down below—one on each floor, I realized before the storey was built that I wouldn't have a moment's peace. So I stopped the work—and had just this one large room finished like a pent-house and decided to divide up the family all over town. Now I am happy. My senior wife is in a bungalow in the suburbs, and junior has a flat in town and they don't get on well either since they parted. So I am left to myself when I want to be alone."

"And where do you live?" I asked.

"Well, nobody knows where I live and it is best that way," he said, indicating he was taking no chances.

That was the garret I had fallen upon in my hunt for a place, which would be far away from the motley crowd and which would be within reach of a purse, which was limited. The kindness of friends who looked in now and again had made the garret look more pleasant than it otherwise would have been. Beginning originally with a *charpoi*, a cupboard, a table and a few chairs it had grown to a well-furnished bed-sitting room with a carpet at one end, a polished oak book shelf, two beauti-

ful pictures on the walls, a radiogram, cushions, shaded lamps and the general atmosphere of a modern one-room apartment. But the building as a whole was old and dilapidated. Now and again if you saw the landlord on rent day, and he was in the right sort of mood and had been left alone by his two wives, he would oblige with a coat of paint over the front door or a whitewash of the ceiling, but he always emphasized that what he did for me he would do for no one else at the rent he charged for the garret, which was probably true. But there was, I think, the feeling within him that this was the retreat he had built for himself and having failed to use it for that purpose, he wanted it to be used by someone, who lived a life after his heart. Often he would sit round the room, moving from chair to chair, talking on long after the rent cheque was in his hands, and always left with the determination of providing himself with some article of furniture similar to something in my garret. But what he wanted most was one of the two pictures on the wall. There was one of a pierrot kneeling at the feet of a pierrette, who was shedding her silken dress, and the other—a picture in front of which he often paused but never too long—was a nude, her head down over the edge of a couch, her one hand overhanging the side, the other clasping her breast as if it were sore and her body limp after the affair. You saw the head first, the body in repose over the ruffled couch, bare down to her knees and the legs on the other side in a way you couldn't see them.

Mohamed Aziz, my landlord, could never look this picture in the face. And this was the one he wanted. Often I would pretend to leave the room to fetch something from the terrace which was partly roofed into a verandah, but Mohamed Aziz was as uncomfortable alone as when I was present and I knew exactly how he felt. It was as if something had been denied him in life and he could not realize an uncertain ambition. White women he had known, he once confided in me. He was, he told me, quite a lad in his younger days and had a physique that was, as he put it often, "*must*" and even now stroking his somewhat unkempt moustache, he felt sure he could have what he wanted because he was rich and had the right connections. But he couldn't have that limp figure in the picture on my wall and Mohamed Aziz wondered why he had never seen a woman like that. That was something Mohamed Aziz never understood, and he always left the garret a little unsatisfied with himself and with the picture on the wall.

Where I lived I was sufficiently aloof. I touched the great city only on the fringe, mentally, spiritually, physically. Between my garret and the hill at the other end of the road to town lay the backwash of the Bay and often in the evenings as I stood on the terrace and looked across the bay, I felt as if there should have been a ferry to take me across, and a ferry to bring me back to the garret, so as to crystallize that aloofness I had acquired because of my mode of

living. Sometimes I was afraid it would result in affecting a pose, but the quiet I enjoyed was worth the risk, and it grew on me the more I stayed alone, and the more rare became my excursions into town. After a while that aloofness began to give me strength—a power of introspection because of the constant presence of the self, a power of detachment because of the distance between myself and the rest of the world. It would be stupid to say that I felt as if I was on a different planet or an uncharted island, but my predominant feeling at coming into residence there was one of self-sufficiency, of self-reliance and of never feeling lost and alone. It was being by myself too much that had brought this about and I felt the better for it, free from that disillusionment which comes from too much contact, free from that familiarity which breeds contempt. I liked humanity and the world seemed full of nice, kindly people, whom I was always glad to see, who enquired after my health and who, when I left them, expressed a wish to see me again—soon.

Down below—two and a half storeys below—at my feet by the water, and across this pool of water over which there was no ferry, or at the end of the long road there lay the city which I so dreaded to approach. The city to me was like Algiers to Pepe le Moko and the garret was my Casbah. At least I liked to think it was so. Each time I visited the city I felt relieved I had come back from it alive. And so I did that day after taking Judy back to her home in the Causeway.

and leaving the rhythm beats of Maxine's dancing class behind, to return to the quiet seclusion of the garret

It was bright that night, and the water rippled a light silver-grey. Like a thermometer that had burst at my feet, you could see the mercury rolling towards the beach to wash the pebbles with its shiny, silver grey. Across the horizon on the right was an empty void—endless space that had no line of demarcation, like a fading Hollywood death-scene. No shadows across the night, no silhouette against the sky. Only dead in front of you and on the left were tall, dark figures that stood out black in the moonlight. The flicker of shadows on the road, the trickle of light from the shaded street-lamps, a speck here and a flash there, was all that stood out in the night, for it was the second year of the war and the black-out had come to us as a precaution if not necessarily as a cure. Inside every one of those countless windows someone slept in the big city, unmindful of the horrors that haunted the European scene. Across the stillness there came no drone of Dorniers and Stukas to disturb the peace of the night. No sound of crumbling debris, no flames from burning houses, no cries of buried babies, no groan of dying men. Thank God, one said to oneself, for the things that have been spared us and for our distance from a war whose lips we had not yet kissed. Such was the nightly prayer I said, as I stood on the terrace of the garret, softly, because there was no one else to listen to me. In the

cool, quiet of the night, it would have been a sacrilege to raise one's voice. Softly too, because at the other end of the town was Judy, the girl in the blue, printed cotton dress, now fast asleep if she was as tired as she looked, and Judy was such a funny girl she might have been awakened by my whisper in the night. Often a restlessness of two kindred souls kept them awake. And no genius of science had discovered the secret of this disturbant ray.

I had never really met the people who lived below me. I think it was the landlōid who first told me of the Khoja lady, a widow, who lived directly below. She was a quiet, retiring old lady because I never saw her nor heard her voice, except on days of festival when flocks of Khoja women rolled up to visit her and if I happened to be in at the hour, I could hear them all speaking to the old lady at once, as Khoja women are wont to do. And then there would be a strong flavour of *pilaw* from the room below and a dash of onion and garlic and the shrill voices of the Khoja women and the swish-swish of their embroidered slippers. More than that the Khoja lady never bothered me and as Khoja holidays were few and far between she really didn't intrude upon my quiet.

On the first floor lived an equally quiet occupant. I think he was married, but I had not yet seen the wife. All I was conscious of was the brass board of Dr. Felix D'Souza, L M & S—a dark Goan of about fifty, who wore a black alpaca coat with white trousers all the year round and gold-rimmed spectacles and who

carried an old leather bag in and out of his owner-driven Morris Ten, whenever I saw him. The first six months of my stay, Dr. Felix D'Souza never knew of my existence or I of his. Then one day as we both ascended the stairs together, I picked up an evening paper that had dropped from under his arm, and Dr. Felix D'Souza had acknowledged me kindly on the stairs since then. We felt then that we lived together and it gave me a feeling of security having a doctor on the premises.

Dr. Felix D'Souza was an emaciated specimen of man. Perhaps the clothes he wore accentuated his thin physique. His collar was always two sizes too large for him and though in many ways he was trim and dapper—the way he pinned his tie, the starch of the stiff butterfly-wing collar, the well-pressed cotton trousers he wore—he seemed a complete misfit in his clothes. He appeared the sort of man, who on his return home changed immediately into a multi-coloured sleeping-suit, and did most of his reading—medical and otherwise—in a long, old-fashioned easy-chair which I could see from the drive to the house. But I don't think Dr. Felix D'Souza did much reading in medicine. He looked rather as if he belonged to the school of medicine that had faith in God and nature and when a case went hopelessly wrong, put up its hands and attributed it to the Will of God. That was my impression of Dr. Felix D'Souza from the few occasions on which we had nodded to each other on the stairs. But, then, maybe I was entirely wrong.

There was no ground floor to our house at all, and if there ever was one, it had now been converted into garages. In these rested the black two-seater, the Morris Ten of Dr. Felix D'Souza, a long old open Fiat which was seldom used and probably belonged to the Khoja lady, and that was all. One or two doors were permanently closed and no one knew what was stored inside.

That was the little world on top of which I lived. There were no other houses in the immediate neighbourhood. A long way behind us were the outskirts of the palace of an Indian prince and the house itself was so far from the entrance to the garden and so covered with the foliage of an abundance of trees that grew there that it was almost imperceptible to the casual passer-by. Not far from that on the other side of the road was the race-course, a long stretch of green with the white rails making a circle around the patch of green, and the cement stands that looked horribly cold and gruesome from afar. They were like tombs which many a punter might have erected to the memory of an inglorious day. And that was as far as I wanted to see around me, because beyond these were chimneys of factories and roofs of labourers' homes, and the spire of some Christian church and the dome of a temple or a mosque. At night at least all this was merged into the darkness of the black-out which during the last few months had been enforced more intensely.

That is how I had watched the darkness grow,

even as I had watched the months that had passed since the outbreak of the war and the strange way in which all our living had weered round this darkness Gradually, but surely, it had struck at the economic fibre on which our life was based Though separated by so many thousands of miles from the scene of that grim tragedy, I had began to be drawn as if by an inevitable, inexplicable force into the midst of it, feeling on so many occasions as if I, too, was part of this suffering which was Europe, part of that destruction which was consuming the cities of the West Perhaps it was because my mental make-up was that of a masochist, but then all Europe that lay under the Nazi heel felt like that, a tortured humanity that was struggling to free itself from its pagan enslavement

Yet these were times when I felt as if I symbolized that free world of intellect that still existed outside the sphere and influence of Nazi Germany—this force which came into the great world of thought and grew like a moron, stood knocking at my door and disturbed my peace of mind, my complacency and my little world of the garret more than the Khoja women did on festival days or that two-inch-too-large collar of Dr Felix D'Souza Even as Judy had felt the distance between herself and the stars, so I felt the gulf between the garret and the outer world, a gulf which I dreaded to bridge But all these thoughts were hardly in my mind the night I returned home after leaving Judy and parking the two-seater in the garage below I climbed the two and a half flights of

stairs, past the brass name-plate of Dr Felix D'Souza
past the nameless, paintless door of the old Khoja lady
till I came to my own garret on which the moon still
shone with that same silver grey

CHAPTER THREE

A WHOLE week passed without much happening. My excursions into the great city were few and were restricted to calling on some of my more personal friends, sipping drinks with them in their more luxurious apartments or seeing a good picture in town or looking into the bookshops for new books. Sometimes in the shadow of the evening I would take out the black two-seater and let her rip along the road, but, as always, it was in the other direction away from the great city—on the road that led out of the town. No one really bothered about speed limits once you left the congested streets of the suburbs. Only because of the shaded headlights I used to keep the car within reasonable control for fear of encountering a bullock-cart blocking the road on a turning or a coolie walking across lazily like a somnambulist. I would drive down far into the country—for miles and miles along a road that led far north and which passed little parched fields on which something should have grown, I felt, but never did. But I never stayed out too late, because the books I had collected were just asking to be read and the radio with which I tinkered all day had always some news to give.

One evening as I sat out watching the sunset, Pir, the boy, brought a letter that had come in by the evening post I never received anything at this hour and hardly knew the postman called so late in the day It was a pale, blue envelope on which appeared my name incorrectly spelt and the address in a girlish hand in that print fashion they now taught you at school As I opened it, I found a card inside—also pale blue on which was printed in deep red “Maxine begs to announce ” There was a gala night at Maxine’s that same evening Nine to one-thirty Partners supplied and light refreshments would be included—all for the modest sum of five rupees “Come and get it,” it said in bold caps at the right-hand bottom of the card

That was funny, because Maxine didn’t know my name, nor Judy if that was in my mind And if they didn’t know my name, they certainly didn’t know the address I looked at the card over and over again and at the envelope in which it had come The post-mark was indistinct except for the date which was of the day before I could get no other clue, so I put it aside on the table near me, the card face downwards not to distract my attention from the setting sun It was then that I noticed a little writing on the back I picked it up and read “Do try and come—Judy” And knowing where it had come from, the more curious I became At first I had suspected that Maxine was a shrewd business man and wanted a packed show for his gala night Now I wondered

For Judy was a funny girl and when I asked her whether I'd see her again, she had said "maybe" and now she wanted me to come—if only to Maxine's gala dance with partners supplied and light refreshments thrown in

As I held the pale blue card in my hand with Judy's scribble on the back, the last speck of gold had dipped into the horizon and the grey film of dusk had enveloped the sky. The crimson had faded and the canvas became tinged with that neutral colour which marked the difference between night and day. There would be no moon that night, I knew. Only the fade-out of the Hollywood death-scene smothered the sky and the sea and where the waters went beyond and afar. No star was born, not even the gentle flicker that would be Venus when the night was young, unless it was Judy in that scrawl on the pale-blue card of Maxine's. And Pir brought me my first drink of the day as was the custom of the garret when the sun went down

Pir Mohamed was a trained old bearer. He had served my father for many years before he was handed down to me as a legacy and an heirloom. A devout Muslim, he came from those northern tribes, where a gentleman was judged by the way he kept his word of honour and where loyalty was still a gift of the gods. Whenever I spoke of him, I referred to him as 'The Pir,' for he had the look of a venerable priest with his long flowing beard. But he wore a red fez all day, except at dinner when he insisted on

changing into a white pugree and an *ungurkhan*, a sort of long white coat-cum-robe with a white sash to match. The Pir was very punctilious about table manners and even more about mine and seldom allowed me to eat except in the dining-room part of my one-room flat. His mind was disciplined and could make and unmake lines of demarcation, which to me were invisible, and which made some two or three rooms out of the one I had rented from Mohamed Aziz, the landlord. Seldom, if ever, could I stay on the terrace to finish the book I had in hand, once the Pir had announced dinner. And I never dared ask him to fetch it outside on a plate for fear of receiving his instant resignation. It was the only bit of discipline that my garret knew and I allowed myself the luxury of being subordinate to it. But more than this, the Pir never interfered with my life. He saw nothing, heard nothing and said nothing—and only when I questioned him about the old Khoja lady or Dr Felix D'Souza would he ever utter their names or what he heard or what they said or did. He had acquired a reticence about the rest of the world and, therefore, fitted in with the general scheme of things at the garret.

The Pir was most devoutly religious. He said his prayers in the orthodox fashion so many times a day. Somehow his religious ritual never came in the way of his duties and he was always there whenever I called for him. He was, he once told me, the equivalent of the headman of the *jat* or caste in the

village where he lived He probably was to his people, what Maxine was to Bangalore, but much of the Pir's glamour had faded in the big city Here, he was only a turbaned beabei, as all others were who earned twenty-five or thirty or forty rupees a month No one salaamed him here as they did in his little village Here no one was aware of the nobility of his parentage, or the aristocracy of his ancestors The big-city had turned him into such a little old man

He had a great sense of humour, which was equalled in greatness only by his loyalty Once, when I first left for Europe, he had asked me to bring him a watch, and I had returned empty-handed Then it was a modest sort of watch he had coveted, probably of metal or German silver When I sailed again he put in a claim for a real silver wrist-watch with a silver arm-band, but again when I returned I brought no watch The third time, when I sailed for Europe, he emphasized that he would be content with nothing less than a golden watch—golden being a generic term for anything that glittered in that colour, but once again I disappointed him Now in the prime of life, I would taunt him with the vision of that watch and say I'd give it to him one of these days, when I got married

“ Ha,” he would say with a smirk, and then as if looking into the dim, far-off future, he'd say he could see an alarm-clock rattling on his tomb in the *kabristan* The Pir must get his watch, I always felt

That evening, however, Judy's invitation to the dance had absorbed all my attention I asked the Pir for early dinner, changed into a silk suit and a little after nine, I was driving the black two-seater along the road into the big city in the direction of the Fort where Maxine held his gala dance From the number of good-looking cars parked in front of Maxine's entrance, the gala night promised to be a swell affair and as I mounted the stairs, I could hear the rhythm of the music, the clatter of conversation and the shuffling of feet

Over his cash-box at the entrance, he sat, king man among the dancers, Maxine still laboriously building his castle on the Hudson, down south in Bangalore The gala show would add to his pile and assure at least the draw-bridge over the moat of his castle, for it was cheap out there, remember, and on two hundred a month you could live like a bloomin, rajah

"Glad to see you," he said, taking my fiver, good show tonight, good show Yeh man, just like Bangalore "

"You'll be rich very soon, Maxine"

"Got to have dough Yep—go inside, lots of new girls tonight Go in, *mun*"

I stepped in, which was only round the screen, for Maxine was already in the room The music was playing swing and though it was only just after nine the room was packed There were many new faces too—lip-rouge, make-up, evening gown and all

Yeh, man, this sure did look like Bangalore !

I stood for a while, my hand fumbling in my hip-pocket for my case of cigarettes, the other trying to locate my lighter, my eyes roaming round to spot the girl in the blue, printed cotton dress. Suddenly there was a slight tap on my shoulder from behind and I heard Judy's voice " Didn't think you'd come "

I turned round and she stood before me—so different from what she first looked. She wore an evening gown like all the others, but it was different in that it was clean, well-tailored and fitted her like an evening dress should. It had a large flower pattern on it, a sort of brocade effect on silk satin, worn with a high, stand-up collar, a narrow V-shaped neck that opened low to show the French lace she wore inside, a closed back and a sort of self-coloured sash which gathered the dress round her till it swung out into a full-skirt down below. That was my idea of what she wore, but then I never could describe a woman's dress in that correct way in which magazines like *Vogue* would describe.

When she saw me she smiled and took both my hands in hers and said " I suppose it always comes to you in the end "

" Now look, Judy, stop talking in riddles, will you ? Here I've come because of a nice little note from you and all I hear is that you didn't think that I'd come. Come on, let's dance "

" Not this one—it's nearly over. Sit down and talk to me "

"All right—let's go there under the fan"

She took me round, holding on to one hand and we parked ourselves down on one of Maxine's large sofas. Judy looked quite beautiful in that shimmering light, for the lamp-shades were of a shiny sequin stuff and as the wind blew on the lights the floor looked like a dark shiny-black sky with myriads of little stars moving over it. She was not made up like the others. Her hair, too, was the same—black and straight, falling gently over her little shoulders. Her eyes were not bathed in mascara and she had not emptied a pot of rouge over her face. She didn't hit you, as the others did—right in the eye.

"Well, you've got me here now, what are you going to do with me?" I asked.

"What do you expect?"

"I expect nothing from life"

"Nothing?" she coyly asked.

"Yes, nothing—so that what I get from it I appreciate all the more"

"I expect too much," she said, shrugging her shoulders, and she threw her head back as she did in the black two-seater.

"Still want the stars?"

And she nodded her head.

"But what are you driving at? Here you are dancing away as if dancing was all your life and all your living too. Nothing seems to worry you very much. There's a war in Europe, but I don't think that means to you more than a pause between two

dances Where are you getting? What are you heading for?"

"Yes, dancing is all my life—not all my living though—unfortunately And I am getting nowhere, but what the hell! And this war doesn't interest me much either I've never seen Europe, never will It's a world closed to me It's like my bothering about the future of the man in the moon And what does it mean to me? When it's over, I'll still be the same—probably living on the Causeway as I do now, a fat old lady too old to dance, and none of the beaux of this Europe of yours will come to look at wall-flowers like me They never bothered about my world and whether it was at war or peace or whether my kid ate . . ."

"Your kid?" I jumped on the word.

"Never mind Come, let's finish the dance," she said, changing her tone and the whole conversation

"No, tell me, Judy," I persisted.

"Some other time," and she stood up and pulled me up from the sofa and all I could do was to dance We didn't get very far, when the music stopped and the whole crowd came back to their seats along the wall and Judy went to her chair the third from the left across the floor She didn't look at me at all, but was engaged in conversation with the girls around her and laughed and joked and now and again she'd take her handkerchief out of her bag and dab it on her cheeks when they were hot and laugh and joke all over again

I missed her for the next dance because a guy got

to her a little ahead of me and Maxine's rule was "First come, first served" And the next was a waltz, which I didn't dance anyway, so I sat and smoked and smoked away, looking out of the window down on the road below on the stream of 'posh' cars at the end of which, like an apostrophe, stood the black two-seater that was mine In the middle of this, Maxine came up to me and said as he had done once before "Not dancing, eh? Left out I suppose"

"I don't waltz, Maxine"

"Yeh, but you've sat out twice I see Shy?"

"Not exactly"

"Get you a girl?"

"No—I only want to dance with one and she gets taken before I can get to her"

"Which one?" and he turned round from the window towards the crowd in the room I hesitated for a while and smiled, a little unsure whether it was wise to tell Maxine which girl I wanted

"Tell me," he said, "I'll fix it"

"But it's first come, first served, isn't it?"

"Yeh, *mun*—that's the rule, but I am the boss here and I make the rules and" this is where he leant over and in a whisper said, "I suppose I can also break them" And he laughed loud and put his thumbs into his waist-coat pocket and laughed louder all over again

Then he repeated "Which one?"

Just then Judy passed by, holding at arm's length a greasy little middle-aged Bania, who had too

obviously discarded his dhoti to be able to attend the gala evening at Maxine's dancing class and I indicated to Maxine that that was the girl

"Dee?"

And I nodded my head

"Nice girl," he said, half to himself, "but kind of funny I never know why she comes here at all. Yea, funny But I'll fix it for you"

"Thanks, Maxine"

"No trouble at all" And he looked at me all over and smiled and said "Maybe it'll be a break for the girl *Mun*, I like to do a good turn when I can And he stood waiting for the dance to get over, looking at the gramophone to see how many encores were left His arms were folded now and he was the Maxine in repose And again after a while he turned to me and said, "Nice girl," and cocked his head as Judy passed by with that short, fat, greasy Bania in the white sharkskin suit, who was now bobbing up and down the floor, wielding Judy's beautiful torso in and out of rhythm I thought it obscene—a form of utter pollution

"Nice girl," Maxine repeated, "not a bitch like some of the others"

And I pricked up my ears at Maxine breaking out into strong language And a little later again Maxine said to me "Maybe you've picked the wrong day, *mun*, but I'll see what I can do All the bastards in this world have got the dough"

And I pricked up my ears again at this Marxist

streak in Maxine that was beginning to show beneath the roots of his long shiny hair

The music played a little while more and when it stopped, Maxine switched the records over and flicked that little light on the wall which read "Tango" and then signed to me to follow him which I did. He led the way to an adjoining room, which was obviously restricted to his own use—gaudily decorated for a bed-sitting room with rainbow-coloured silk curtains, green upholstery and pink-enamelled furniture. At the entrance to it he paused and looked at my face and said "Like it?"

"Well . er," and I was taken somewhat aback

"Too modern, *isntit*? Yep, I like to have this atmosphere of a salon where I live. Colour and life. Like my pictures?"

He offered me a cigarette as I wandered round his room looking at the walls on which hung the sort of bathing-suited figures that might have appeared in that American magazine *Health and Strength*, relieved now and again by a nude from the studies of Mr John Everard. I noticed there were no pictures of himself in his own living-room, none of those prize-winning poses taken at Bangalore. On his dressing-table was a silver frame in which to my surprise was the picture of a wire-haired terrier. No women's faces on which was scrawled "Love" or "Yours Ever" or all I had associated with Maxine.

"That was Pluto," he said, as I leant over to see

the picture " Only friend I ever had. Never kept a dog again I'm kind of soft about dogs "

And I didn't say much and Maxine added "Yes, *mun*, I forgot" and yelled for his chokra and told him to tell Judy she was wanted on the telephone in his room " You've got to be tactful," he added We waited for a few minutes and Maxine removed the receiver off the hook of the telephone near his bed, and Judy came in

" Ah ! Dee, phone for you," he said with the air of perfect nonchalance

Judy looked a little perplexed and slightly worried She went to the phone and frantically said "Hello, hello . . ." and then to Maxine "there's nobody there It's got cut off "

" Oh ! Is it ? " Maxine said, beginning to look surprised himself "He said something about the next dance with you "

" Oh Maxine ! And you got me so worried I thought it was .. never mind....who wants the next dance ? " And she smiled and looked at me And I pretended I knew nothing about this conversation

Judy came over to my chair and picked up a cigarette from the box and borrowed my lighter for it She puffed out a whole heap of smoke and said " Sorry, but you know it's Maxine's orders—First come, first served "

" I wasn't complaining In fact I didn't say anything at all Did I, Maxine ? "

" No, *mun*, he never said a word Only his eyes

kept following you all round the room and I've got to please my clientele," Maxine replied, hopelessly mispronouncing "clientele" as he did all other such difficult words

"Okay, next dance is yours," Judy said, "you go first and get me as I come into the room"

"Thank you"

"You see I don't know how to tell you.. What shall I say, Maxine?" And she looked pathetically at Maxine, who got up on this line as if it was a cue, and said his words "I've got to see about the refreshments Give him a dash of whisky, Dee, and have some yourself"

And Maxine left the room

"Well, Judy, what do you want to tell me?"

"Nothing really"

"Nothing at all?"

"I sent you that card and thought it would be fun having you here, but now I am sorry I did"

Then she corrected herself and added "You don't understand I am not free to let myself go tonight Oh, what's the use? Never mind," and she threw her cigarette on the floor and stamped on it till it was dead

"Which reminds me—how did you know my name and who gave you my address?" I asked

"No one I found it out myself Took me a whole week though"

"But how?"

"Your car number I Y 1900 I've got a friend in the Transport department"

" Clever girl—very clever Ever wanted to be a detective ? "

" No—but I wanted to see you again "

" Didn't look like it when I asked you that night "

" Didn't it ? Maybe I was scared "

" Scared of me, Why ? "

" Not of you Scared of myself, maybe."

" Why, Judy ? Why ? "

And she grabbed hold of my nose and pulled it a bit and said

" Mind your own business, Mi Nosy Parker "

" Listen, I've got a perfectly good name."

" I'm going to call you Nineteen-Hundred "

" Sounds like a new century to me "

" Perhaps it's the beginning of a new era "

" You know you hardly talk like a girl one expects to meet in a dancing class "

" Where do you expect to find me ? "

" I don't know."

" Does it make a difference ? "

" No—just that it's so odd, that's all Gets me all mixed up about my sense of values and anticipation Makes me unsteady, a little unsure of myself "

" . . . like finding a virgin when you expected a harlot.... and sometimes vice-versa," Judy interrupted

" Why do you say that ? "

" Just like that "

I looked up at her, perched as she was on the arm of my chair I began to realize why I thought her face was familiar She looked a little like Louise Rainer and then again she had a trace of the Bergner in some of her mannerisms And all the time she was, I knew, just a little girl from the big city, who had never stepped out beyond its shores In passport language she would be called "Domiciled in India" and there were other colloquial terms for describing her

" Got a lift home ? " I asked after a pause

" It's so difficult I want to go with you But I can't "

" It's all right "

" No, but it's not You don't understand Look I've got to be dropped by someone But I'm really going home I promise you "

" But there's no need to explain I've got no right over you "

" Don't be silly It's not that If you can tell me where I can meet you in half an hour after this show is over, I'd love to see you "

" But you'll be so tired "

" Now, don't be annoyed and difficult "

" Shall I pick you up ? "

" No, don't do that It's dangerous "

" Married ? "

" Don't ask too many questions "

" Okay It's a little bit beyond me but I'll wait "

" I know Wait for me by the Bunder Dead opposite the Gateway "

“ All right ”

And just then tango had begun in the other room and Judy told me to go in first and she would follow

“ What about your drink ? I forgot about that ”

“ Not now,” I said and stepped out and got to the dance room and Judy followed a minute or two later and I said “Hello” and asked her for the dance and louder still I asked her where she had been and she replied she had been powdering her nose and we danced the tango as we had done before.. .*Caminito* that little lane, in which lovers used to meet So said the words of the song, once translated for me by a Soho waiter And all the time the sharkskinned Bania was looking annoyedly on

As we turned once round the room and came towards where Maxine was leaning with folded arms on his radiogram, he winked at me and I acknowledged his salutation

CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN Maxine's class was over I drove slowly round to the pier where stood the Gateway of India. In the darkness it hardly looked the impressive archway it was meant to be, the landing-ground for the Viceroys of India, the ambassadors of Britain. Befit of red carpet and the military escort which was a feature of those solemn occasions, the Gateway looked like a purposeless stone structure, under which slept a few homeless souls and around which could be found at this hour of the night a choice selection of midnight loiterers. As I parked the two-seater in front of it I was conscious of having attracted some attention from the policeman on duty, who flicked his torch at my number-plate, then at me and at the space left empty beside me, saluted and walked on. It was a gesture characteristic of a police force, which was constantly being accused of inefficiency. So I suppose the policeman on duty was upholding the tradition of the force, though frankly I believed he was only curious.

I waited patiently for a full half-hour, smoking away in the dark and quiet night. Then I saw a taxi

approach It slowed down in sight of the two-seater and out of it stepped Judy in the blue, printed cotton dress in which I first saw her And we drove away leaving the Gateway to its midnight loiterers

She snuggled into the two-seater and expressed a desire to eat She suggested a little restaurant in the city towards which we drove

“ Gosh, I am hungry,” she said, as she looked up again at the stars and I wasn’t quite sure whether it was body or soul she wanted to feed

“ Haven’t you eaten tonight ? ”

“ Not yet ”

“ When do you normally dine ? ”

“ When I am hungry ”

She seemed so matter of fact—the sort of woman who ate with you when she was hungry, drank with you when she was thirsty and probably slept... when she was tired

Right now she was gazing at those stars and her hair blew in the wind as the black two-seater passed over tram lines and through narrow roads to the eating house in the city She didn’t care about the hair or bother to keep it in place It was typical of the mood she was in—a care-free mood with no regard for tidiness or propriety and with only the stars to engross her thoughts Faster and faster I drove but she lay huddled beside me, her head resting back and her face looking up towards the stars Perhaps it was because that starry sky was so much cleaner than the muck and scum through which we

drove, past rows of shops and houses full of filth and stench, past dustbins that were lined along the route, past garbage heaps—all that which was part of the great city

At last we came to the eating house—an inelegant building in a dubious locality and haunted in the day by the celebrity of the neighbourhood—the pimps, the pences, the pariahs of the town. It was a strange thing about these cheap eating-houses that they were usually named after the Kings of England or they tagged on names like “Emperor”, “Empress,” “Brittannia”. And when the series was more or less exhausted they were followed by “The New Emperor”, “The New Empress” and so on. If ever the British Raj was to leave its mark behind on the Indian countenance the privilege of bearing those marks will undoubtedly fall on the eating-houses which would be the last reminders to us of our great Imperial connection

“Here?” I asked looking at the green, old-fashioned building, along the front of which was drawn an iron grate

“I think so, but it looks closed,” she said. Just then we saw a man peering through the grating and he beckoned to us to come in. We got down and through a side door we got in. The place smelt of food, the sort of rich, undigestible food that is associated with the Mogul

“Yupstairs—spaiciel—family,” the Mogul ejaculated and we fumbled up a dark staircase, the

banisters of which were full of grease and along whose wall was the most flowery design of bath-room tiles I'd ever seen "Yupstairs" there were little cubicles with swing doors and on them, again as on bath-rooms you found "Vacant" or "Engaged," as it may have been At that hour of the night we had a free choice of rooms and were ushered into what was probably the Imperial suite reserved for Maharajahs, Nawabs, and the "*Burre Burre Lok*" I walked in slightly conscious of my unimportance and ostensibly amazed at the high honour conferred on us by the smelly Mogul, who stood in front, a dirty towel on his shoulder and a shabby shirt hanging over his pyjama

Now and again he would wipe the sweat off his brow with the little towel across his shoulder and I suppose he used the same piece of cloth to add that little extra polish to the hot plates in which food was served to us Those who lived in the stench of that rich odour were dead to all other smells—armpits, sewers, bins All these odours merged into the one overpowering perfume of the Mogul's kitchen

Cleanliness, too, was only a relative term and bacteria were vermin discernible to the naked eye. That other world of science that lay below the microscope was a world of fiction, a superstition that was akin to witchcraft, a fad, a fantasy that was the curse of too much civilization

The Mogul knew no law of science or sanitation His one law was the law of Allah, the Omnipotent

Food was divided into two classes—that which was *halal* and that which was *haram*. You ate what was *halal* and trusted in God. You touched *haram*, and your body would rot and your soul would be for ever assigned to the spirits of evil. And the little fellow who stood leaning on the swinging door ridiculed the possibility of any harm coming to those who came to his eating-house, because all of it had been killed and cooked in sight of God.

Einstein must have wasted his time on relativity!

“Chicken-fry,” said Judy, after perusing a well-thumbed menu card. The Mogul nodded. “And you?” Judy asked turning to me.

“I’m not hungry, Judy, I’ll just have coffee.”

She ordered pickles, *furmass*, which was wheaten bread, a coloured sweet-drink and raw onions for herself and a coffee for me. She seemed so much at home in this place.

“Why the onions, Judy?”

“No one is going to kiss me tonight,” she said, and when I didn’t reply, she looked at me from the corner of her eye.

But I didn’t say a word.

I looked out on the street below. So quiet and peaceful it was, though occasionally a cat was seen dashing across the road chased by a mongrel dog. The emptiness was symbolic of the big city at this hour of the night, for all decent people were in bed, asleep. Then a hack-victoria passed by, its coachman whipping a tired horse and in the carriage were

four or five sons of the soil, singing a chant and uttering friendly words of intimate abuse as they merrily wended their way home. Then a taxi—one of those old Buicks which rattled—and in it an Indian dancing girl—for no one else would be out there in an open taxi at that hour of the night—with a moustached Romeo, who could be seen as the car passed beneath the lamps in the street.

These moustached Romeos were in abundance in that part of the city where we dined. They wore bright red fez caps and bright striped shirts and coats that were cut by an 'Army tailor' and balloon trousers, which had no flies, but hung on with the help of a long red silken cord which usually showed below the shirt. Most of these men itched in the nether regions, more a habit than an ailment—a sort of gesture that was characteristic of their breed, an affectation rather than a necessity, an attitude towards life one might almost say, suggested to some extent by the climatic conditions in which they lived.

Then a little later two urchins passed by, the sort of stunted children who never grew up to be men, and whose only distinguishing feature was the navel that stood at the apex of a bloated stomach. These urchins were littered all over the face of this country because this country could not afford the luxury of contraception. The big city was full of them, as it was of dancing girls and men who itched and moustached Romeos and taxis and Victorias. Yes, that was life in the big city.

Judy was really hungry from the way she tucked in the fried chicken. She was quiet, maybe because she was dining out with a comparative stranger. She made no pretensions about her class, her connections, her friends. Perhaps she had none of these. She belonged to no particular type. That was what was so attractive about her. Her utter lonesomeness, her individuality, her completely unattached existence. One didn't think of her in terms of anything. Like a little dog that had crossed your path, you patted her and gave her food and patted her again and all you felt like saying was "Poor dog." She'd come to you if you called her, and give you her paw to be friendly and when you'd had enough, she would meekly go away. Never offended, never hurt. Always taking shelter within herself like a prawn that cuddles up in a shell.

"Hello prawn," I'd say once in a while and she'd look up and I would watch her frightened eyes and she'd look down again. Only once she asked why I had been calling her a prawn that evening and I told her I didn't think she'd understand.

When Judy had finished, the Mogul cleared the table and placed before us pan and supari and a bill which hardly amounted to anything at all and I paid and we left the room that was reserved for maharajas and nawabs and the *burre, burre lok*, down the stairs with flowery design of bathroom tiles, back to the black two-seater which was waiting on the road.

"Where do I take you Judy?" I asked, adding with a gentle smile, "straight home?"

"No. Not after filling me up with a big meal. You've got to give me time to digest."

"Shall I take you for a long drive?"

"No. I'm not keen on driving tonight."

"Shall we stop by the waterfront?"

She shook her head, and I waited till she could make up her mind. After a while she came a little closer to me, grabbed the sleeve of my coat and said "You're not half so forward as when I first met you."

"Was I forward, Judy?"

"You might have been."

"And where did it get me?"

"I know, I know—you are the guy that waits till things come to you."

"Why do you keep on repeating this silly idea, as if I was immovable like a mountain?"

"Aren't you?"

"No, not consciously."

"Well, I've come to you, haven't I?"

I was not sure what Judy meant. And when she repeated "Haven't I?", I didn't know what to say. And she snuggled closer to me and threw her head back and gazed at the stars and then, apropos nothing at all, she said "Yes, they frighten me."

"What frightens you, Judy?"

"The stars—specially the shooting ones, when they flash down the sky. They give me the creeps."

"Silly," I said, more with affection, of course.

"Don't leave me, Nineteen Hundred," she moanfully said

"But I'm not I'll take you round town, round and round till you're tired and fall off to sleep, and then I'll quietly drive back to my home and lock you with the car in the garage"

"Will you?"

"Yes," I said, "I will". And she looked at me from the corner of her eye, but it was a different sort of look from the one which said "I've heard that before." Because after a little while she asked "Where is your garage?"

"Under where I live"

"Where do you live?"

"Over the garage," I replied

"Smart boy! Ainchya?"

"Uh-huh! Smart boy for smart girl"

"Then take me to your garage"

"But you're not sleepy—not yet"

"But I am," and feigning to be asleep over my shoulder added in a faint voice. "So—sleepy"

"Then you go to the garage, little lady."

"So . . . sleepy," she repeated in the same faint voice

And I drove on towards the garret

It must have been past three, when I drove the two-seater into my open garage. Judy had not said another word in the car and I wondered whether she had really fallen asleep. When I switched off the engine, she asked in a faint voice "Are we home?"

And I didn't reply because I wasn't sure whose home she meant and whether I'd done the right thing after all Then she looked carefully at the empty walls of the garage, then at the banisters of the low ceiling, looked once again at the empty walls and then at me She paused for a moment in which I felt horribly self-conscious till she broke the silence with "Yes it must be home" And I felt so much relieved But she made no effort to move She had fixed her gaze on me and I tried to stare her out

In moments like these when man and woman look into each other's eyes, they feel a strange magnetism drawing them to each other, an inexplicable inner urge, a force that brings them closer Then they hold back the urge and the gaze becomes more fascinating than ever and the urge becomes greater too In that moment of restraint there is the pain before the moment of realization which is the ultimate merging of the one into the other—the moment that can be both a split second and an infinite ecstasy It was a moment such as Columbus lived when he saw a haze on the horizon and asked himself "Is that the land?"

And then Judy said "You know, I forgot"

"What Judy?"

"The onions I didn't eat the onions" And with that she came to me and kissed my lips

Women kiss so differently They hardly ever kiss alike Some peck, some linger, some kiss dry, some are wet and salty with sweat Some smother

you with lipstick, some kiss as if they were saying just "How d'you do," or "Good-night" and as if kissing was part of a courteous formality or a ritual. Some kiss with a firm mouth, others are limp about the lips. Some hold your head tight, others like to be held. Some give when they kiss and others take. Some are savage and breathe deeply and want to press with all their force as if the idea was to crush the substance that is man.

Yes, women kiss differently.

For man it is all part of that experience which is woman. Yet Judy didn't kiss like any of these. She came to me not on an impulse, but as if it was a premeditated, pre-determined act.

Sounds almost like murder when I come to think of it.

She held her head up, her neck was strained. Gradually she raised her body, her breasts heaved with a sigh and then she held her breath till lips touched lips for a while, softly as if in caress, moving just a fraction to avoid feeling stale, pressed forward, moved again, and faded away with a sigh. Then she looked at me like a sculptor viewing the work in hand. She wanted to look back upon me in retrospect. She bit her lower lip and then she dropped her eyes.

"Are you a Congressman?" she asked.

I was a trifle perplexed. Even disappointed at her bringing up politics at a moment like this.

"Why do you ask that?"

"Because you are offering passive resistance," she said. Then felt very shy and blushed a little and snuggled, as if into a shell, beside me. And I could hardly believe I had found this girl at Maxine's.

We left the garage and went upstairs to my two-and-a-half-storeyed garret on top of the world. We were careful not to disturb the slumber of Dr. Felix D'Souza and his wife or the Khoja lady whom I'd never seen. Slowly we climbed the steps, till over the last half-flight I picked her up, because she was very tired.

How frail and limp her body was, how supple, how soft to touch! She radiated a warmth of feeling, unlike a dead weight in one's arms. She helped a little by clinging on to my neck and seemed to derive a mischievous pleasure at seeing me struggle to carry her up.

I put her down, opened the door and waited for her to go in first. She waited too and then said, "Carry me over the threshold," and I did.

"I feel like that, Nineteen Hundred," she added, "Oh! I feel so good today."

Then she stepped into my one-room flat and looked at it from corner to corner without a word. I watched her eyes as she stopped dead at first sight of the picture on the wall, the one which had left Mohamed Aziz always so unsatisfied. Then those eyes fell and without turning to me travelled like lightning till they stopped for a while at the sight of the bed and moved on again over the rest of the room.

"It's just like you—this room I mean," she said
"A little untidy perhaps, but it's been lived in. Some-
how I can smell you in it"

"Easy, little lady," I said, "that's just the fresh
sea air"

"I don't mean that," she said laughing. "I
don't know how to say it but it's just you. Like a dog
I could sniff my way into here and know it was yours.
I must be an old bitch"

"Don't say that, Judy. I don't like it. Don't
ever say that again"

"I know it destroys the illusion for you. But that's
why I said it. I want to be in character with the environ-
ment from which you picked me up. You said you
didn't believe I came from Maxine's. Perhaps I don't"

"Come on, sit down. Relax. You're a bundle of
nerves."

And I felt her pulse and it throbbed like the beat
of a native drum

"Here," I said, "sit down here on the bed," and
she did and I lifted her legs and took off her shoes
and shuffled the pillow under her head

"Now you lie quiet while I fetch myself a drink.
Like something to drink?"

"No, thanks," she plaintively said. "Give me a
cigarette"

I took one from the walnut-wood box on the table
near the bed, and lit it for her and lit one also for
myself, and went to the verandah to get myself a
drink

What a darkness there was in the sky, as I looked out from my terrace, where, as was the custom, the Pii had left on the table a phial of whisky and two glasses and a key to open the soda bottles I think the Pii had a theory that all alcohol should be consumed in company and though he knew little about drink, for his religion forbade it, he had theories on it just the same Time and again he had seen that the other glass was not used, but he insisted on leaving two glasses just the same and I never disturbed his routine I poured out a little drink for myself and in the other glass too, fetched two sodas and some ice from the thermos and took them all into the room and left them on the table near the bed

“ Well, Judy, let’s drink a toast,” I said

“ I don’t drink as a rule I can’t take it Makes my feet go funny and then I am not sure of myself ”

“ But for a toast you must Even if it is only a sip ”

She picked up the glass, sat up and said “ What do we drink to ? ”

“ Yes, what shall we drink to ? Maxine’s where we first met ? ”

“ No, I wouldn’t drink to that ”

“ To the blue, printed cotton dress in which I first saw you ? ”

“ No,” she said with such a soul face

“ To the black two-seater ? ”

“ No, that’s much too dangerous ”

“ To the stars you like to gaze at ? ”

“ No, they frighten me sometimes ”

“ To tomorrow ? ”

“ No, let it come ”

“ But I’m so thirsty, Judy ”

“ Then let’s drink because we are thirsty What do you say ? ”

“ Drink ! ” I said with emphasis

And we drank

“ Tired ? ” I asked her after a while

“ Not much ”

“ It’s three o’clock, you know ”

“ Is it ? ”

“ Past three, as a matter of fact ”

“ You punctuate the evening with such sordid details ”

“ I’m only thinking of you Really Because I don’t mind I sit up to all hours of the day and night and sleep when I want to ”

“ Don’t you have to work ? ”

“ In the ordinary sense of the word, that is if you mean rushing each morning to an office and sitting at a table, no ”

“ What do you do then ? ”

“ I live,” I said and when I said that I felt as if I had discovered something I didn’t know about myself before

“ How can you live doing nothing ? ”

“ Everyone has his own idea of living and I suppose I have mine I found you, didn’t I ? Tucked away though you were in the big city Maybe it’s

not important to you, but I call that living, because I experienced a new feeling To me it's more important than doing something in the orthodox sense of the word. say like building a bridge or writing a book or whatever you think is necessary for the purposes of living And then I come back to this garret of mine I call it 'The Garret' you know—and take it all in and because I'm far away from life as you understand it, I can absorb that feeling into me, as if it went right into my soul And then I bring it all up again like a cow and chew the cud I am, in a way, independent I have a small income of my own, though not enough for all the things I'd like to do and some day I want to step out again, for which, as Maxine says, 'You've got to have dough' and so I write sometimes and if the stuff sells, well, I feel as if I too have worked like all the others Though right now I feel as if I have been a long time on the dole, but I've known what it is to have dough "

" What have you written ? "

" Oh ! Nothing really "

" No, tell me "

" Nothing, really Occasionally I write about people "

" Will you write about me ? I suppose there's nothing about me you can write, though I always think I have a story which I must tell the world But everyone thinks that, I suppose I began it once and couldn't get further than the time I left home

That was a sort of climax for me, though many people leave their homes all over the world ”

“ Why did you leave your home ? ”

“ That was a long time ago I was nineteen then Very obstinate, mind you Always was as a child My father used to thrash me, like I was a boy Even when I was quite old He was fond of me, but in a selfish sort of way Mother was different She was always thinking in terms of what would be best for me They were both very conscious of the fact that they were real English, though I was born here and have lived here all my life They could never go back to England They knew it, yet they believed that one day they would and that was the curse of it Poor things, they never did They were both buried here They never really belonged to this country and even when they knew they could never leave it, they preferred to be regarded as visitors to it I remember once at school—I must have been about fifteen then—there was a dance before Christmas and the brother of an Indian girl I knew asked me for a dance and I accepted And did I get a blowing up for it ? Just did nothing else—he merely asked me to dance The next time he came up for a dance, my father was rude to him, and my mother turned her face away I can see it now as if it was happening again before my eyes And that was always the difference between me and my people Because I liked this country and felt it was mine and they didn’t In fact, it’s funny, but when someone calls me

an Anglo-Indian, which I suppose I am, I rather like it But my people would have got hurt ”

Judy stopped to sip the whisky and went on . “ Well, as I grew up I could see less of their point of view and they of mine On everything we differed Their idea of morality was different to mine They objected to everything I wanted to do I was like a bird in a cage and I wanted to break out Then came the villain ! Yes, my life reads like an old-fashioned melodrama, I am afraid He was a flashy young man about town Well-bred and very English and all that He had been to a public school and seemed to know half the people in those English illustrated papers I think that impressed my people very much He asked me out and to my surprise my people didn’t mind He was their kind or perhaps he was what they wanted me to be, because he was really English He had a good job here in a firm of shippers, and was always very busy, had a lot of dates with girls, but he told me I was the real thing Ha, it makes me laugh now Though it wasn’t his fault really It was him all over—just empty, careless, irresponsible You know the type They are a regular breed They try to be friendly with the Indians because it’s the noble thing to do I think it gave him a feeling of being great and strong and patronizing So he came to our house and took me out but never to the places he usually went to We’d go to Green’s instead of the Taj, because he’d say it was more fun and more homely He never asked me

out for a drink at his club or introduced me to his friends, except two fellows who actually stayed with him, and who looked upon me, as he did, as just a piece of fluff. And if I went to the Taj ever and saw him there with a party, he'd nod as an important executive would to his little typist. It didn't matter really, because I never really cared for him. But my people thought he was the right man for me and they let me go wherever I liked so long as it was with him. It gave me a freedom and that's why I took it. He was all right, he was entertaining and he amused me. It wasn't difficult to amuse me in those days. Well, it happened one day, because I was getting a little lonesome and in a weak moment he proposed. You should have seen the joy in the family. Their little girl would be back in the fold. My father opened a bottle of champagne, the first I had tasted and thought it sour. And so I was engaged. Under cover of engagement I got more freedom and I'd go out always saying I was with my fiancé. Nothing wrong, mind you. But with my school friends, their brothers, ordinary people, but of course taboo because of their complexions. Tony was going to marry me, so what did it matter? But even so I was never taken by him to his circle of friends and introduced as the girl he was to marry. I was so young. I didn't think of all these things then. I only see them now and it's too late. I went out more and more with the man I was to marry, till I came home at all odd hours of the night and no one in the house thought it

wrong. And, you know, he sort of grew on me. After all he was the only man I'd ever known and well—one day—I stayed out a little more than was good for me. After all it was with my future husband, so it was all right. But things went wrong. I had no experience. And I went and told him that we must get married at once. And that's when light began to dawn on me. He put it off and one day I had to tell my family. And what was so funny was that they were not perturbed at all. One day he told me he had to go away on a short trip to the East coast and that on his return everything would be all right. He promised it wouldn't be for more than a week. He left and I heard from him after a while to say that his firm had sent him urgently to England but he'd be back in a few months at the latest. He never mentioned about marriage in any of his letters though I wired him to come back first, but I found he had left before that letter was posted to me. I went to his office and asked his boss and then I found out that he was never to return at all. He had got the sack. And it was apparently not the first time he had got a girl in trouble."

Judy kept on talking and looked all the time at the ceiling, for she was lying flat on the bed. I wondered whether she even knew I was there still. Nor did I like to intrude. Her voice filled the quiet of the night and I watched her lying on the bed, wrapped in a spell and in that blue, printed cotton dress which now seemed part of her. And Judy went on

" What was worse and what made me cry—though I don't usually—was that he got married in England about the same time as I got my baby. And I read about his wedding in a London paper, as I was lying in bed. After I got out of the nursing home, I never stepped into my father's home again nor did they want me, I think. They never came to see the child, as if it was all my fault nor cared whether I lived or died. Only two girls I knew at school came every day and when I was really bad they stayed on in turn. They were Indians, the ones I was never to mix with. When I got out of bed I went and stayed on my own and have done so ever since. My people left this town, and soon after, my father died. I was not even informed about it though my mother knew my address. And a year later she, too, died and I was all alone in the world with my baby. First I tried to get a job, but really I was no good for anything. My friends helped me, but what could they do? And I was young, wanted to live life and I took the easier way of living. And so here I am."

What could I say? What could you say when a woman who had on every occasion eluded you and been evasive suddenly dropped her guard and reeled off her life story at four o'clock in the morning? I had almost forgotten how it started and then I remembered it began with her asking me to write her story.

I went out and got two more drinks and when I brought them back I sat on the edge of the bed, close to her. She got up and put her head on my shoulder.

" But my kid is not brought up on one single pie of that easy money. That's why I dance. Yes, I dance for Johnnie."

Her eyes lit up. Her face was still. It was the first time she had mentioned Johnnie to me, as if he was part of her private life, which she lived within herself. Then she smiled and a light shone on her, as if the vision of the morrow had obscured the darkness of yesterday.

" One day he's going to look after his old mother. And I am going old so quickly. Don't you think?"

" Yes," I said jokingly, "so old and I think so sleepy."

" Yes, I am....so... sleepy", she said with a put-on yawn

" Tell me one thing, Judy," I said very seriously and was a little surprised myself when I said it, "why did you come here tonight? Or didn't you think you'd come here?"

I thought at first I had asked the wrong question. But Judy replied: " Oh I knew I'd come here. That's why I changed. I even woke up the ayah and told her I'd probably be very late and to keep an eye on Johnnie."

" Yes, but why, Judy?" I persisted

" Why? I suppose I wanted to."

Judy looked tired, so tired. She had shed years of her life in that brief hour. A ghost might have appeared, for she was white in the face and her lips were pale. As she put her head on my lap and clutch-

ed my hand, I felt her grip weakening. Her world had crumbled at her feet. She had pieced it together from her life and now she had shattered it and flung back the broken pieces into the past. Only one fragment mattered and she clutched it—desperately, like a drowning man clinging on to a floating straw. For it was all her life, all she really lived for—Johnnie. “One day he’ll grow up”, she must have kept repeating to herself or she must have been mumbling a disjointed prayer, for her lips were moving though I could hear nothing. Or perhaps it was just the fright she got at looking into herself and being disappointed at what she saw. Then she put one hand over her head and said “It’s no use. It can’t go on. I’m tired of it.”

“No, Judy, that’s no way to face it. We all get tired of life, but life must go on.”

“You always get scared so soon, Nineteen Hundred. I didn’t mean I was going to die. I told you once, didn’t I, that I wanted to live. I will. But the life I’m leading now is what I want to end. I want to break away. I will break away,” she said with determination.

“Could I help, Judy? I can a little.”

“No, it’s enough that you’re here—somewhere around me, but not like that. Not you. It would spoil everything. Give me a little time to think this out my way.”

And I nodded and stroked her head. Her soft hair fell back and as my hand touched it, her eyes closed.

"Play some music," she said after a while

"Now?"

"Uh-huh"

"All right, but it'll have to be very soft, because I like my garret and would hate to be chucked out for being noisy"

"Try the radio," Judy said and I got up and switched it on. For a while I got nothing else but morse code signals of ships crossing in the middle of the night. Then a faint sound of music and as I tuned in to catch the melody, it became clearer and more audible.

Somewhere in Europe a church must still have remained unbombed, somewhere in Europe a choir was singing full-throated. Somewhere in the midst of that madness of destruction, a few voices were still lifted in prayer and as the volume grew you heard the organ playing the first Prelude of Bach's soft repeating melody "Di da dah, di .da..dah" and then the voices "A . ve Ma-ri . a, . . . gra . . . ti—a ple na" And then the organ swung out like a great accordion stretching its bellows. The voices were lifted—higher—and higher—the living voice of living man. Would they finish their prayer, I wondered or would some ghastly explosion bury their church, their prayer and their song? So often from this same station had I heard them die—the men I had never seen, their women and their children

"Sanc—ta Ma-ri—a Sanc—ta Ma-ri—a
Ma-ri—a, O—ra pro no—bis. . . ."

Yes, pray for us, they cried, pray for us!

And as their voices died to the tune of the fading
'A——men!' " Judy fell asleep

I arranged the pillows for her—gently—switched off the radio and the light, took her shoes off, and covered her body with a thin sheet, kissed her gently on the forehead, and strode out on the terrace from where I could still see the big city. There it lay before me—cold, dark, emotionless. And as I sat watching it, my eyes must have closed and I dropped off to sleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN I woke up next morning it was half past eight I was stiff because of the chair in which I had fallen asleep The Pir stood in front of me, perplexed He had seen more unconventional awakenings but they had always been in bed Yet he merely wished me 'Good-morning' and confronted me with a tray of hot coffee It was uncanny how he knew exactly when I would get up The coffee had been prepared to synchronize with my awakening How did he always know when I would awaken, when it varied so much with the night before ?

I got off the chair, still feeling tired and stiff and walked quietly into the room to see if Judy was still asleep She wasn't in bed I peered into the bathroom It was empty I looked at the terrace again, and once I even looked down on the road below. Judy had gone My eye then caught sight of a note pinned to the pillow on the bed Hurriedly I went to it It read · " I must go back to Johnnie I dreamt he kept crying for me in the night I didn't have the heart to wake you You were so fast asleep Don't call for me I'll come when I am ready Thanks for the memory—Judy "

"What memory?" I said to myself Judy was a funny girl She could have awakened me, and I'd have dropped her home She must have walked down the road leading to the big city and then taken a bus Taxis did not prowl for a fare at my end of the world I came out again on the terrace and looked at the long road that led to the big city I could picture at some early hour of the morning a blue, printed cotton dress trailing along the length of the dark grey asphalt I pictured her as I'd never really seen her, walking away from me till the blue dress became a haze and from a haze it became a dot till a huge red bus stopped to absorb the blue dot and she was gone—back to the big city to which she belonged and from which for a night I had stolen her She left no word about meeting again She didn't want me to call for her "I'll come myself when I'm ready"

When?

Ready for what? All these thoughts passed through my tired mind and I couldn't quite make sense of what I saw or thought So I washed, changed from the clothes of the previous night and with the morning paper sat down to my cup of coffee

For me the morning always was more crude than the night The bright rays of the sun threatened to expose the flaws in my character I could never appreciate the sun until it was setting, even as you sometimes do not appreciate a friend till he is about to say good-bye I never understood why those scores of white men and women lay for hours in the

beating sun on the fringe of a swimming pool till their skins peeled off and their bodies were scarred and brown There was something strangely masochist about the pain they inflicted on their bodies just to be able to show it later like a new gown that had been recently acquired Women were the worst offenders You saw them fagged out, burnt and wearing low-cut gowns to show their marks and scars and wounds They were always tired with lying too long in the sun Tired for fun, tired for love and tired of the joy of living But they burnt themselves just the same, year in and year out And they picked the time of the year when the sun was at its worst It may have been that this was a part of their desire to mingle more freely with the brown millions or to lift the colour bar by being coloured themselves—part of the new order that was to come to the world But, in spite of all the white women who were turning brown I hated the heat and the dust and the glare The Pir would put down the chicks almost as soon as the day had really begun and a curtain would divide me from the outer world for the rest of the day—till the sun went down again So that I never became conscious of the environment which surrounded the garret

This garret could have been anywhere For me it varied with the books I read or the music I played or the thoughts that crossed my mind In this way, parts of the world came to me on short excursions—even some parts to which I still had to go. They could come to any one if only one could be

sufficiently detached Therefore, there were times when the big city, which was there only across the way, was in the figment of my imagination many waters across, and a London street, I imagined, rolled and rattled outside my house or the *bois* of Paris-in-the-spring or the cobbled streets of a little Spanish town And strange people would continue to come and go beneath my terrace and for me Dr Felix D'Souza would change into an English gentleman or a French diplomat at the Quai D'Orsay or a troubadour in the Spain before the civil war And the Khoja lady whom I've never seen would even become an English Countess or a French couturiere or a Spanish señorita How equal the world was till you divided it and made it unequal, till you built frontiers and barriers and erected "Verduns" all over the face of it! Perhaps after this war it would be equal again, for the war was being fought for a new order, for democracy and liberty and all those things for which the last war was fought and the war before, and the wars that are yet to be fought, till one day democracy and liberty and all those things would at last come to this world

But those were really not the thoughts that crossed my mind that morning It was too soon after the night before, too soon after Judy's monologue, as she lay prostrate on the bed before me, too soon after I had been shaken from my own egotism to have thought for a moment of anyone else, too soon after my little world had been intruded upon That

morning I felt more like singing out parts of a Cole Porter song which I used to hear a negro sing in a night club in London—a negro with sleek hair and that ebony polish which only a negro can have

*I was a humdrum person
Leading a life apart
When love flew in through my window wide
And quickened my humdrum heart.*

And then there was something about love flying out again and the negro asking what was this thing called love and then those beautiful lines with which his voice rose above the soft notes of the piano and I sang them even though I didn't think they really applied to me, because they were so good to sing

*I saw you there one wonderful day
You took my heart and threw it away.. . . .*

Yes, Judy, you walked in through my window-wide last night and in the morning you were gone again And I waited—waited till you were ready to come to me, whatever that meant and whenever that might be

CHAPTER SIX

IN the days that went by only one thing of any importance occurred. It was an invitation to a house-warming party given by the Budas—Beh and Suni. After years of living in flats Beh suddenly realized that he had reached that stage in life when he liked to settle down and have a place he could call a home to which he could repair from wherever he came, to find something constant waiting for him instead of having to look for a new flat all over again.

Beh was not young. He was fifty though he had preserved himself well enough to look like a prematurely-greying man of thirty-eight. Those twelve years between his real age and the age he looked were part of Beh and his exclusiveness, his living too much away from the crowd that dated itself with every month, every day, every season and almost every party. It was a funny thing but I had never quite sat down to analyse him and to work out his pedigree, his caste, his pigeon-hole in the big city. He might have been a Sikh whose real name was Behsingh, but then again he didn't have the long hair and the turban.

and the beard He might have been a Hindu Bania whose name was Behvandas, or a Maharashtrian by name Behlaram Again he might have been a devout Moslem complete with a League and had a name Beh Mahomed, or a Kashmiri Brahmin attached to the Congress and known as Behvarlal, or a Parsi of a well-to-do family who had naturally to be attached to the Panchayet and who would in all probability one day become a knight or get an O B E and in that case his name would have to be Behramji Somehow Beh didn't fit into any of these watertight compartments

If you looked at Suni, his wife, your first thought was that she was sweet She had just passed the forty-mark but she was still very attractive, because she was *soignée* and had charm and personality. You could even compare her with the girls of twenty and even the youngish women of thirty But Suni had passed the stage when her attraction was merely physical She had acquired that more lasting quality which in a man manifests itself in character and personality and which in a woman just manifests itself

Suni at first struck you as a Hindu name but you wondered, because she had acquired that touch which was essentially her own, though much influenced by the rue Royale and Fifth Avenue to which, she had with her husband, paid frequent visits But she never wore sandals on stockingless feet nor did she have a red dot on her forehead and jingle bells and

plastered hair with the rich odour of sweet-smelling jasmin oil. She could have been a Parsee and have had the name of Sunabai and have worn blouses and sudras and embroidered sarees from the shop of Govindji in the Market. Or she could have been the veiled Moslem woman of yesterday—a Shia or a Suni—with a long flowing *jubbha* and silk pyjamas embroidered with gold, and slippers, like those of the Khoja women downstairs on days of festival, and over all these, because of a rigid custom that was now dying, the horrid monstrosity of the *boorkha*, hiding her face from the glance of other men. But I knew Beh would never be so selfish as to cover a face that must have once been so beautiful and deprive her of fresh air on which she had obviously lived and grown up, and confine her to the stuffy, smelly, sweaty atmosphere of the *boorkha*.

So neither Beh, nor his wife Suni, could give me a clue to classification. They may have been one or other of the many permutations and combinations that arise out of intermarriage, but when I bore in mind what intermarriage must have been like in the days when Beh took Suni as his lawful wedded wife, I knew this was out of the question. These two had grown up to an independence of thought much later in years when the shadow of the world fell on them and when their gaze lifted from the narrow confines of the particular city, where they were born and bred and brought up to be just two other people. But Beh and Suni were more than just two other people.

Their features too were no guide to their caste
Beh was tall, though not very, for he stood five-ten
He had sharp-cut features, deep-set eyes, a fine nose,
a soft mouth fringed with a well-groomed moustache,
and a chin that always looked clean and well-shaved

Suni was just Suni To break her up into her various anatomical parts would have spoilt the effect of the whole The things I noticed about her were silly really I used to remark that she was smooth and soft and complexioned to suit whatever time of the day it was or whatever sari she wore or whatever function she graced with her delicate presence

They had one child—a girl, they called Duli I might have looked at her to see if she revealed any trace of caste which their parents did not—and caste seemed so important in the big city But I couldn't—or perhaps I never tried

In appearance and in their mode of living these two could have fitted in anywhere in any of the big cities of the world They belonged to that rich class of people,—and by rich I do not mean only in wealth,—who belong to that greater, freer world which bears the name of cosmopolitan They were the type of people who stayed in the luxury hotels of the world, who travelled on luxury liners and who yet retained a certain simplicity of living that was common to man Their wealth had not obscured their sense of values and they had never forgotten that shorn of their exterior they were only part of that great but poor family of man Not the Budas, and that was what

I liked so much about them—their never-changing allegiance and loyalty to their fellow men

They had one other loyalty which was perceptible. Beneath the polish of the cosmopolitan beat a very ordinary Indian heart. In this loyalty they were almost sentimental, and though their passport classified them as "British Indian", the words "British" and "Indian" were two such different words, constitutionally overlapping perhaps, but in all other respects mutually exclusive, and though these two people between them combined all that was best in those two cultures, their sentiments were so marked that if one did have to exclude the other, it would be the "British" on their passport that would go and the "Indian" would still remain

That was the one dominant characteristic of these two charming people. They bore the stamp of that indivisible unity that was Indian nationality. And though India was still not ready to accept this idea of the oneness of nationhood and preferred the more old-fashioned divisions of castes and creeds and communities, to me the Brées were symbolic of that united India and indispensable to it. Without them the structure of Indian society, such as it existed in the big city, would not be complete.

Beh's new house was on the top of the Hill. When his father bought this piece of waste-land, he had little idea that the son would ever build a house on it. Buying land in those days was a form of security. It gave little yield but was a sure investment and was

not speculative like the stocks and shares of a cotton mill or a steel company. Depressions all over the world had so often affected the value of paper money. Wars were becoming too much a feature of modern civilization and even gold was a varying commodity. Land was then the only security for the future—land which went down from father to son and on which the grass would always grow and on which trees, if planted, would yield fruit. That was more or less true of the many properties Beh inherited—vast acres in the villages on which the farmers lived their lives. This particular plot was not bought with that same idea of securing the future. It was rather intended to symbolize the arrival at the top—for Beh's house stood above all the other houses and looked majestically down on the rest of the city that lay below. Beh's father did not live long enough to build that house and somehow Beh had preferred rushing round from here to there till one day, only a year or two ago, the urge to settle down gripped him and he decided he would consolidate his position and this new house was the result.

I would not normally have gone to this house-warming party. All parties in the big city seemed too much alike to be anything but boring, but because of my love for Beh and Suni and their regard for me, it would have hurt them too much if I didn't. It was the only party, in that sense of the word, that they had given or were likely to give again for quite a long time.

The invitation card was in the usual formal manner of "requesting the pleasure of the company of " but Suni had added a few lines to it which made it impossible for me to decline the invitation or make any excuses for staying away

The morning of the party, the Pir was seen to bring out the dinner-jacket—all that was left of a wardrobe of which I was once so proud—the suits that were made for me by a firm of Saville Row tailors whose premises have since been bombed The dummy which represented me must have been buried in the wreckage, which made me grateful for the torso of flesh and blood which was mine and still intact The Pir took a particular pleasure in seeing me go out in a dinner-jacket on the few rare occasions on which I did, and if I was not mistaken he celebrated them by going to the movies himself, while I was away He often hinted that I should go out to dressed affairs more often, even as my father had done, wearing his decorations, which the Pir remembered having fixed so often In fact my father used to say that if the Pir could have had his own way, he'd have sent my father in tails every day with the original and the replica both dangling from his neck I had none of these to wear and I often suspected a desire on the Pir's part to substitute the missing colour by a blue silk handkerchief he tried to smuggle into my top pocket on such occasions My black shoes he'd polish and polish till I was really afraid he'd wear them out Everything was kept ready and perfect for the

evening—all except the feeling of going which I didn't have

Quite early from the flat below had come that morning the clatter of conversation, the high-pitched voices of Khoja women and the swish-swish of their embroidered slippers, and I knew it was a day of festival. It had come again and I was glad of it, because it marked for me a day different from the others. The rich smell of *pilaw* and the burning of incense would bring a fragrance into my garret and the feminine chatter would break the monotonous silence which had grown into an empty, speechless void which neither the Pir nor I had dared to break.

Days had gone like that. Silent days and if the radio could have been made to replay the last tune, it would have still been the Ave Maria with the full-throated choir and the church organ of some yet unbombed church in Europe.

Then a little thing happened which quickened the pace of my existence. It happened a little before lunch when the postman rang the bell and the Pir brought a letter on which I recognized Judy's hand. I tore it open and read

The Little House,
Nestle Lane, Off The Causeway
"Nineteen-Hundred!"

I feel so happy to be able to write this to you. I've washed my hands and they look clean. Come and take us, Johnnie and me, for a drive about seven and then we'll drop Johnnie home and you can give

me some dinner 'Moorgi-fry' in our Imperial suit at the Mogul's shop I've so much to say but I'll keep it all till I see you—my love, Judy

P S Note the new address "

This was no letter to which I could say I had a previous engagement. This evening was so important to Judy that Beh would have to understand and if between two people I had to hurt one, I knew it could not be Judy. She had had more than her share of hurting. Her new address, I knew, was not without meaning, but as I did not know the Little House, I could not be sure of what that change meant. I only remembered the lane she now lived in because of a horrid little garage to which I once went to get help to change a punctured tyre, but I could hardly recollect a house in that lane which could be described as habitable except by the very poor.

But that was not so important now. I wanted to rush over to Beh's office and explain to him something I could not easily tell him over the phone, so I grabbed a coat and got hurriedly into the two seater to the amazement of the Pir who seldom saw me stir out at this time of the day. I sped along the long road into the city, towards the Fort, where near the Circle stood Beh's great big office. I had told the Pir before I left that I wanted two of the best dinners he had ever cooked and that the bottle of champagne I had in safe storage should be iced for the occasion.

Buda Ltd was a gigantic concern. They controlled so many other concerns. They were shippers,

bankers, stevedores. They controlled steel, oil, electricity, and almost every conceivable major industrial endeavour was connected with them in some form or other. I parked the two seater in a side street and rushed up in the lift to catch Beh before he went away to lunch. It was the second time I ever went to his office. The first was on the day France fell and I remember going up to his room late in the evening—about half after seven, seeing his light still burning and realizing what the fall of France would mean to him who was educated at the Sorbonne and who although he was a hundred per cent Indian regarded France as his second home. I remember that evening well, and how, as I walked into his room unannounced, he looked at me as if he had seen a ghost walk in, and long after I had sat down did he become conscious of my presence and his first words were “Yes, I knew you’d come”

Today the office was packed. I never realized how many hundreds of people he employed till I passed through endless corridors and enclosed offices within offices. At last I got to the guardians of Beh’s room—three red-*pugreed* sepoys, not of the type of the days of Clive in India, but their more commercial successors. I wrote my name on a slip of paper, which went first to a young man sitting at a table wearing a Cambridge college-tie. He scrutinized it and came over from his desk to ask me the nature of my business—a horrid habit with punctilious secretaries whose job apparently is to keep every one

from seeing every one else I said it was a personal matter and that my name would convey enough to Mr Buda He doubted this and almost resented my self-assurance, but in a few moments I saw the same Cambridge-necktied man come out of Beh's room reflecting in every gesture of his the essence of amiability Behind him trailed three or four other odd people who had apparently been in conference with Beh

I stepped into Beh's room, shivering because of the air-conditioning, a luxury I had yet not learnt to appreciate

“ What's the matter ” Beh anxiously asked, “ anything wrong ? ”

“ No, why ? ”

“ Tell me the truth ”

“ No, nothing really It's only about the party tonight ”

“ I knew you'd do this, but this time I won't let you off Nor will Suni ever forgive you—whatever your excuse ”

“ Look Beh—you know exactly what regard I have for you both I want to come this evening—very much But something happened a little while ago and I have to choose between disappointing one of two people You know I wouldn't make a fuss about nothing ”

“ But I know what you'd do in order to get out of a party ”

“ It's more than that Beh Something came

into my life a few days ago—or perhaps it would be more correct to say, I came into somebody's life I think, unconsciously, I changed it Today I got a letter after what I believe is the change and I know you can spare me and the other person cannot That's why I've come to ask you to excuse me tonight and understand the reason ”

“ Is this on the level ? ” Beh asked, more seriously this time

“ Yes, Beh ”

“ A girl ? ”

“ Well . . yes ”

“ You, the unattached, detached, impregnable fortress of a man ? ”

“ No, Beh, you don't quite understand It's not quite so personal as you imagine ”

“ Missionary reform, shall I say ? ” And he laughed

“ Shut up, Beh,” I said mock-seriously “ It's too nice to be made fun of ”

“ Love always is,” he said, raising his eyebrows

“ It's not anything like that I'm not just another man in love Really I'd tell you if I was ”

“ People in love often don't know it themselves ”

“ Now look, how do I convince you ? ”

“ Don't try You won't Not till I see her myself ”

“ She's too timid to be seen by you ”

“ Why don't you bring her along ? ” Beh said after a moment's deliberation

“ Bring her along ? ” I was startled

The thought had never struck me and now that it did, it complicated matters even more. So far Judy had belonged to her own little world and now Beh was suggesting that all these private worlds should merge and come to a party—Judy, her world, my world and all. To me for that moment it seemed as impossible a suggestion as to tell a Catholic priest to keep a microphone near by when a penitent was making a confession, so that the whole congregation could hear the story.

“ No, Beh, no. Not today. I can’t explain it to you now and it’s late and time for your lunch. Some other time, perhaps when I’ve told you everything. Not today ”

“ Yes, it’s time for lunch. And I’m glad you came because I was going to feel lonely eating all by myself ”

“ Why are you lunching alone ? ”

“ Because my wife doesn’t want to be bothered to feed me on a day on which the whole house is so busy, getting ready for the evening. So, and rightly, I have been politely asked to eat out. Come on, let’s go. I have a board meeting at three ”

I was not a bit inclined to be rushed into things, because where would I start and what would Beh’s reaction be ? I just hadn’t time to work it all out. But I meekly acquiesced.

We lunched at one of the better hotels of the city. Our table was in the loggia, because the main dining-

room was reserved for a Club lunch—one of those business-relation-promoting clubs, whose motto was 'Self before Service' or 'Service before Self,' I never could quite remember Beh and I saw all the busy bodies of the commercial world gather and stick little tags on the lapels of their coats because that promoted good-will or something and helped an Englishman to come up to his Indian "brother" and say "Hello, Mehta" and Mehta would say "Hello, Smith" and it just showed how the two peoples could be brought together just like that without the need of a formal introduction Then Mehta would perhaps order two thousand spindles from Smith's office and Britain and India would for ever be linked by 'ties of friendship' and we would of course be partners in the great commonwealth of the Empire! This club was, I was on many occasions authoritatively informed, above caste and creed and religion and promoted goodwill amongst men, so long as the men amongst whom goodwill was to be promoted were respectable and well-to-do and had some social standing and status and were not representatives of labour or anything silly like that

But there was always such a thing as a limit to the goodwill amongst men

Beh was not a member of this world-wide organization of good-will amongst men I asked him as we went past them why he as a capitalist was not in the told and he replied "Have a heart" And that was enough for me It also helped me to begin telling him the story of Judy

Beh listened very closely. The little friendly sneer on his face during the early stages disappeared after a time. I naturally only told him the more relevant parts of the Judy story. He never once appeared surprised or embarrassed. In fact there was a time when I had to say "For goodness' sake say something instead of being so indifferent about it." I was almost abrupt, but he was unruffled and replied "I am not indifferent. It's one of the few nice things I've heard. It almost brings back my faith in man."

And then I felt much better and went on

"And then comes this letter today," I said, giving him Judy's letter which I carried in my pocket. He read it while I finished the food that had gone almost cold on my plate.

"I'd give a lot to get a letter like that," Beh said, when he finished reading the letter.

"Now you understand why I asked you to let me off tonight."

"You must go to her, I quite see. But there's something more you can do. You must bring her along to the party."

"How can I, Beh?"

"Why, are you ashamed?"

"Ashamed? Good God, no!"

"Then why not?"

"Because I don't think she'd come. And if she did, she would feel uncomfortable and I'd hate that."

"You haven't asked her. She won't feel un-

comfortable She shouldn't—not in my house—with you ”

It was just the way he said it that made me think he was right—as if he understood and was there behind me, behind Judy, with his support, with his power, his whole self

“ Think it over. It's the right moment Life is beginning for her today The past has broken loose from her Let her begin again well We'll look after her and tide her over her early shyness, if she needs looking after Yes, you must bring her over ”

“ I think you're a skunk,” I said playfully, even though he was fifty “ You've got an awful way of convincing people ”

“ Come on,” Beh said, “ I've got a job, you know It's quarter to three and a board of directors are going to pickle me over the dividend I want to declare ”

He sent for the bill

“ But, Beh, suppose Suni. . . .”

“ Suni is my wife I know her better than you ”

“ Yes, but . . . suppose Judy doesn't . . . ”

“ Judy will,” he interrupted, as if he knew her better too

“ Look, Beh That's just about enough from you I'll try, but if I can't, I can't ”

“ Come on, come on,” he said, after he had signed the bill, “no ifs and buts You'll be there and Judy with you ” And he hurried out of the loggia while I trailed behind

We returned to his office and he disappeared in

the lift and his last words were " Nine-thirty, don't forget " And I got into the two-seater and drove home

The Pir was still fidgeting with my dinner-jacket

CHAPTER SEVEN

At five minutes to seven the black two-seater was seen purring down the Causeway with malice towards none and charity to all, stopping almost with respect at every traffic signal and moving off again only when the policeman's hand beckoned. As I sat at the wheel I saw the motley crowd that briskly paced the pavements along which I drove. Maybe my aloofness had mellowed a little and I felt closer to these people of the big city, from whom I shrank as a rule and whose lives seemed a frantic and perpetual motion resulting in nothing, achieving nothing, like a complex, complicated jig-saw puzzle one spent hours solving, and when the pieces were gathered and a pattern unfolded itself, one broke it up again.

That was life in the big city.

I turned when I came into Nestle Lane. The road was almost cobbled and was partly in a state of repair. There were very few houses in it for it was a tiny lane. A handful of shops were lined close to each other—a grocer's, a tailor's, shops that were open till late at night and where the men slept where they worked because they had no other home. Across the

road a little naked boy chased the hoop of a barrel trying to keep it rolling even though it almost ran into my car Then an empty space where a few cars which had no tyres, no hood, no paint, no upholstery were parked in a disorderly manner Next to it a garage and then my eye caught sight of a one-storeyed building on which appeared a newly painted board telling me it was "The Little House "

To look at, it was quaint but very poor—much poorer than the flat-house where I had first dropped the girl in the blue, printed cotton dress It was drab and the ground floor had trellis-work to keep burglars away There was not a sign of life, not a sound Only a dim light at the door-step and the darkening grey which made shadows of light and shade These were touches of relief in this otherwise cold, dull picture that stood before my eyes A fat servant woman cleanly dressed in a white saree, who sat on the steps at the landing, stirred as the two-seater came to a halt She smiled at me and disappeared inside

I wasn't quite sure what I should do Would Judy know I had come? Or should I start ringing door-bells till I found her I waited for a while to see if the fat servant woman would bring me the answer And she came back again and smiled and indicated with a gesture that I should wait and I did, till down the wooden steps I heard the patter of feet and then saw a girl's stockingless legs and the shoes of a little boy as they came down and then a little of her dress and a little more of the boy and a little

waist and a little boy and a woman's hand holding him, and a bag and a waist and a form and breasts and a chin and lips and a nose and eyes and hair

She looked very beautiful—this little mother with her son

And I stopped and lay back in my seat and looked and looked at her till she came right down and stood before me and kept standing without a move And the little boy looked up at her and then at me and looked up at her again

And I broke the silence and said "Hello, Johnnie," and the little boy's voice replied "Hello"

And I got out of the car and lifted him up—high up at arm's length and said "Let me look at you"

And he giggled and said "You're tickling me," and I lifted him and put him into the two-seater and looked at Judy all over again and said "Are you going to say something to me or shall I?"

"I'm too happy to say anything now"

"Are you, Judy?"

"Yes—Nineteen Hundred"

And I opened the door and she stepped in and sat beside the little boy and I leant on the door and looked at both of them She was dressed in black, just plain, thick black crepe, dull black like the paint of the black two-seater She had short, puffed sleeves and the dress clung snugly to her almost with gentle affection A little belt of black leather showed up because it shone against the dull black of the dress The neck was cut high with a slit—a slit at the top,

just enough to put her little head through, and her hair hung more delicately than ever

Johnnie wore a white shirt open at the neck and with a patch-pocket from which peeped a white handkerchief
White short pants and brown shoes with white socks
And his hair was brushed well back and carefully parted

“ You haven’t kissed mummy,” he said, after staring at me for a while

“ Johnnie ! ” Judy said remonstratively

“ Should I, Johnnie ? ” I asked

“ Yes, I did It’s her birthday today ”

“ I’ve never seen him behave like that... . . .
Really,” and she grew red in the face and blushed, and stammered, “he’s usually shy of strangers ”

And I leant over a little nearer and reached for those scarlet lips till I touched them with mine and kissed her gently

“ Happy birthday,” I said

“ Thanks,” she replied and looked down, away from me And I got into the car and we moved away

“ Why didn’t you tell me Judy ? ” I said after a while, “ I’d have given you a present ”

“ I don’t want a present ”

“ No, but I would have liked to bring even a few flowers I should have brought them anyhow, but I didn’t dare ”

“ I felt afraid like that too But I’ll have a birthday again—I hope ”

“ Silly, don’t say stupid things What do you mean ‘ I hope ’? ”

"Don't scold me. Not today. Take us for a long drive. Wouldn't you like that, Johnnie?"

"Yes, mummy—a long drive!"

"Where would you like to go, Johnnie?" I asked.

"A lo—ng drive," he said, stretching out his hands to indicate the length he wanted

"Where shall we go?" I asked again

"To China," he smartly replied, "all shoe-makers there"

"Johnnie always thinks Chinamen are shoe-makers, because I take him to one for his shoes," Judy explained

"Been to Mexico, Johnnie?"

"No," he replied a little unsure, "Have we mummy?" he appealingly asked his mother

"No, darling. Not yet."

"Where's Mexico, mummy?"

"Far away, Johnnie—far away where there's music and moonlight and coffee-beans and where you're going to take me when I grow old. Aren't you?"

"Yes, mummy, I'll take you," Johnnie replied and he turned to me and asked "Will you lend me your car to take mummy to Mexico?"

"Yes, Johnnie, of course"

"You must come too"

"Yes, Johnnie, if I can afford it, I'll come"

"I'll pay for you. Mummy said we're going to save up. That's why we came here from the other house—to save money"

“ Quiet, Johnnie, don’t say silly things ”

“ But you told me mummy Didn’t you ? I wouldn’t tell a lie ”

“ Yes, my child,” and she put her arm round him and kissed him on his hair

We drove on till we came to the edge of the big city, to the road that led to my house and the garret It was not quite dark and from the distance you could see the silhouette of the house against the sky How wonderful it felt driving towards it and past it on to the road that led to the country and into the night

“ Listen, Judy,” I said after a while “ I am taking you to a party tonight Will you come ? ”

She didn’t answer for a while, so I repeated “ Will you ? ”

“ If you want me to ”

“ Yes, Judy, I do Very much It’s at my best friend’s They’ve asked me to bring you and I’d like you to come with me He’s built a new house and it’s a house-warming It’ll also be a birthday party for you which I might have thrown ”

“ But there’ll be so many people there whom I don’t know I suppose it’ll be all right But I just feel . ”

“ No, Judy, today you said a new life begins and with it new people must come into your world and I must take you to them ”

“ Yes, but sometimes even in a new life the past comes back ”

Little Johnnie was still lying cuddled beside his

mother. He was tired and had almost fallen asleep The fresh air of the evening had fanned him to sleep and when we saw how tired he was, we decided to turn back and return to the little house in Nestle Lane

“ Shall I come up or wait downstairs ? ” I asked when we got back to the little house

“ As you like It’s a tiny little place, but you might as well see it now as later Come on, Johnnie Johnnie darling, come, my love ”

And Johnnie stirred and wiped his eyes and said “ Are we in Mexico, mummy ? ”

“ Yes, darling ”

“ He’s a sweet kid, ” I said to Judy “ I like him ”

We climbed up a flight of old wooden stairs They so badly needed a coat of paint They were not clean and even the door of Judy’s apartment, which was far from modern, was somewhat dirty Judy rang a little bell and the servant woman opened the door and smiled at me again

Judy lived in two small rooms In the room in which I waited, while Judy went into the bedroom with Johnnie, I noticed that though the things she had were very few, her room looked so clean and well kept and so neatly arranged There was a little table in the corner with a few chairs and a divan and a carved Cashmere table with a brass top A small book shelf with a few books—a curious assortment *To Beg I am Ashamed* leant on *The Days of Our Years*

and then there was *Gone with the Wind*, *Anthony Adverse* and *The Forsyte Saga* and the short stories of Sommerset Maugham. There was also a copy of the Bible next to *Aesop's Fables*

Judy came out and asked me whether she could change now, or should take her clothes with her, and whether evening clothes were necessary

“ I think we'll have to dress ”

And I thought of the Pir and how disappointed he would be if I did not wear the clothes he had brushed and the shoes he had polished all day

“ But come and change at the Garret,”

I added

“ All right ”

And she dashed in again

Then Johnnie came out in his pink striped pyjamas “ Are you going with mummy ? ”

“ Yes, Johnnie, do you mind ? ”

“ When will you come back ? ”

“ Very soon ”

“ Will you take me for a drive again ? ”

“ Yes, Johnnie,” I said, “ lots of times ”

Later Judy came out carrying a little bag in her hand

“ What has he been saying to you now ? ”

“ That's a secret, isn't it ? ” I said to Johnnie

And Johnnie put his finger to his lips and in a whisper said “ It's a secret ”

“ Go on, you little rascal To bed you go ”

“ Good-night, mummy ” And he stood on his

toes till his mother bent down and kissed him good-night. And then he came over to me and did the same, when Judy said " You must shake hands with the gentleman "

" You kissed him, didn't you ? " Johnnie retorted

And Judy blushed all over and Johnnie kissed me good night and the servant-woman smiled at me and took him in to bed

We got back into the car

" I like him, Judy " I said as we drove off " Why don't you give him to me and let me look after him for you ? "

" Oh no, not him He's all I have "

" I didn't mean that I just like to look after him as he grows up and see he gets what he should have "

And Judy didn't say anything in reply

When we got back to the garret, the Pir was at the door of the apartment and bowed most ceremoniously as he had seldom done before to any of the other lady-guests the garret had entertained. He brought a large plate of *pilaw* which he said the old Khoja lady downstairs had sent for me with her kind respects. The Pir added that he had already gone downstairs and thanked her on my behalf and that in the morning I should thank her myself. I merely acquiesced. It was all I could do in matters like this on which the Pir had made decisions. And then the Pir disappeared with the *pilaw* to make

arrangements for dinner, because my short notice made him feel he was acting in an emergency and he liked that quickened tempo into which he got when such an emergency arose

We changed before dinner and as I was ready first, I went out on the terrace and waited for Judy to follow The Pir had laid out in full array the whole of my miniature bar—gin, whisky, vermouths, sherry, a bottle of *pernod fils* and bitters and liqueurs Today surely was a day of festival and the Khoja lady, whom I had never seen, had sent me the *pilaw*, and then it was also Judy's birthday and a new world had opened up before her All this could not be drunk to in the ordinary way with just whisky, and so I poured myself some *pernod*, "cooking" it, as the French would say, with the water dripping into it drop by drop

It was a clear and starry night and Venus was out early, shining with a bright shimmer and her reflection fell into the pale green cloudy *pernod* And I drank my first sip of it after many months and it brought back much that life meant to me before I came to live in the observation tower atop the big city

Elsewhere when I had drunk this absinth it was to keep pace with the life around me, to feel the pulse of a people who throbbed with life and love Now I drank it because it quickened my humdrum life I felt my heart thump like a schoolboy walking up on prize-day amid the applause of a congregation of parents to receive his prize Only in my case, my prize had

walked up to me and I sat in the darkness and watched it come from the lighted room

A perfect picture she looked in a new dress of white chiffon, close at the waist and full at the skirt

Her white skin, fair as it was, made her face look like a piece of ivory against the pure whiteness of her clothes

Her scarlet lips were the only touch of colour in that ensemble

No rouge, no jewellery

Her straight black hair that fell over her shoulders was the only piece of adornment she wore, and she carried in her hand a gold bag, which was probably empty Even in the bright light of the room from which she came, she shone with an inner light like a glow-worm that carried its own beauty

“Here I come,” she seemed to say as she walked towards me Her head was held high and from the stillness of the evening a gentle breeze blew and her straight black hair that fell over the shoulders caught it and she closed her eyes and her hair ruffled a trifle in the breeze and fell back on her shoulders—black and still

“This is as I am,” I could picture her saying, “take me as I am Take me as I come”

And I stood up and put the absinth down and held out my hands and she came to me—into my arms, and I held her close and felt her heart beat quicker, quicker, quicker

And she moved her head a little and rubbed her

nose against the black silk of my coat, polished though it already was by the Pir, and she snuggled closer to me and then looked up and her lips asked to be kissed and I kissed them beneath the gorgeous canopy of the heavens, and her face shone, even in the dark, with love and not with sweat, and the star of Venus smiled far away in the sky

“ Give me a sip,” she said, “ to get my breath back ” And she lifted the glass of absinth and drank from it and hurriedly put it down with a sour face and said “ What is it ? Mouth-wash ? ”

And I laughed

“ No, my sweet, not mouth-wash ”

“ But I don’t like it Give me something nice and sweet,” and I mixed her a drink all my own with whisky and Cointreau and a dash of lime and crushed ice and shook it well and she sipped it and said “ Phew !—sweet dynamite—phew ! ”

“ I want to blow you up ”

“ What about my legs ? ”

“ As long as you can walk I’ll let you, and then I’ll carry you ”

“ How nice it will look ! You carrying me into or out of my first party with you You’ll probably feel ashamed of me ”

“ No—not ashamed I’ll never be ashamed of you, Judy ”

“ Never ? ”

“ Never ”

And then she asked me about the party I told

her about Beh and Suni and what they meant to me, how much they wanted me to go to it tonight and about my lunch with Beh

“ They sound very nice ”

“ They are very nice ”

“ But I’m still afraid ”

“ Afraid of what, Judy ? ”

“ Just afraid Haven’t you ever looked forward to something and as it drew nearer and nearer, you got afraid something would happen to spoil it ? ”

“ But what could happen ? ”

She didn’t answer, but drained the glass down and exclaimed “ Phew ! ” and as she put it down she said “ I feel better now ”

Then the Pir came in clearing his throat, a variation of the old idea of knocking before entering a room, and announced that dinner was ready and we went in to taste the fare and to dip into the *pilaw* which the khoja lady had sent

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE party had already begun when the two-seater drove into the porch of Beh's new home and we left it there to be parked by one of Beh's chauffeurs I pulled my coat down, adjusted my bow-tie and pushed my handkerchief in place before taking Judy's arm and walking into the vestibule with its simple modern decor and its circular flight of steps We happened to arrive at one of those odd moments when there was no one ahead and no one behind, so that we could look round and feel at ease without the consciousness of being seen by anyone around

Half-way up the stairs Judy said "Let me hold your arm instead I feel better that way," and I let her

What a lovely house Beh had built, not too large and not too small It reflected that essential touch in modern tropical architecture—an emptiness suggested by unfurnished space It was typical of the old-new period, smacked of a revival, but above all reflected in every nook and corner of it an intense simplicity Decor played an unobtrusive part in this house of Beh, because adornment without purpose invited his contempt There was also something

subdued about the lighting, something soft about the blending of colours Everything seemed to be a mere background for the people for whom it was built "It is to be lived in," the architect seemed to say

I thought as I walked up those steps that Beh should have called it "Lebensraum", for this was the ideal to which man, whose living was cramped, could aspire At the top of the first flight of steps there was a door which opened on a passage, and at the end of it was a large hall like a Cuban *patio* at the far end of which was a dance band ready to play We walked down the passage and we could see people gathered in small circles, laughing and chatting to one another At the entrance to it we stopped and looked round and saw Beh and Suni coming towards us

We waited

There was a broad smile on Beh's face as he stretched out his hand to Judy, and before I could introduce them, he said "I am so glad you've come I am really glad This is my wife"

And Suni and Judy shook hands

"Must I welcome myself?" I said in the brief pause that followed

"I am sorry," Suni said, "but we've got so used to having you around"

"Never mind I know I'm important only because I accompanied the lady"

"Yes", Beh said to Judy, "when you come next time I'll send you my car, so you won't have to cart such riff-raff about"

"Oh! I don't know," Judy replied looking at me, "I am quite fond of vagabonds I must be," she confidently added.

"Aha!" Beh interrupted "Young lady, you are in love!"

Judy smiled and blushed a little "Do I show it so much?" she asked, and I was the one who began to feel a little uncomfortable at this sudden change in Judy. How different she was from the cautious evasive little girl in the blue, printed cotton dress!

"Yes, you do show it my dear" Suni quickly replied "That's what is so beautiful about you About both of you, I should say."

"It was very nice of you to have asked me, Judy said

"Don't say that Because we feel so glad that you've come."

"Thanks" Judy said

"Could I get a word in edgeways in this dialogue of mutual admiration?" I interrupted

"I know" Beh quickly retorted "he wants a drink"

"Yes I do—I wasn't getting my bearing.

"Come on," Beh said and dragged me away. while Suni stayed with Judy. We had walked a little and as we moved towards the drink bar nodding at a few persons who greeted us Beh said seriously "I know now why you didn't want to bring her

"Why?" I asked a little too quickly

"Because," Beh replied with perfect nonchalance, "of a simple reason She is beautiful"

"Idiot," I replied in relief

"She's very lovely" He fumbled for words and said "... I don't know . she's just nice Don't let her go It's the nicest thing that has happened to you"

"Talk of something else, will you? All day I've been a bundle of excitement Now I just like to mop my brow and have a drink and rest"

And Beh yelled for two good drinks

High-balls!

And we toasted each other in silence and I drank and felt so much better, and the music began to play

Two other men joined us at the bar One was Hem Panthuck, whom Beh always referred to as the young nit-wit with too much money The other was one of his hangers-on

Hollywood had surely had some influence on our younger men and the American screen had affected the thought and manners of some of our people It was to be seen here in the big city where those who were born rich attempted to reproduce that purposeless existence too often portrayed on the screen by the play-boy or again to walk through life like the big chief in a gangster picture with the howarya-babe feeling and a half-dozen stooges playing yes-men to him

Today only one yes-man was on duty, the one who was the best dressed of the gang and who could

conduct himself reasonably at a party like this Hem had everything money could buy, and what it couldn't, he didn't want "So what the heck", Hem thought

I knew Hem slightly but enough to be sure I didn't want to know him more He was a young man on the right side of the thirties Could have been classed as handsome but for that vacant look on his face and that shallowness that was stamped all over him He would have been well-bred if you could have judged by his feeding, the complexion of his skin, the softness of the palms of his unworked hands

He was rich Of that there was no doubt and every inch of his well-tailored suit, the crease of his trousers, the immaculate whiteness of his shirt, the soft silk of his bow-tie, the monogram on his hand-kerchief, his cuff-links, left no shadow of doubt He was the sort of rich young man whose underwear you could be sure would smell sweet of Molyneux and naphthaline balls

Everything about him was air-conditioned, except his temper which was never cool And he looked and felt a walking-image in plush—soft to the touch and soft in the head As he walked up to us, it brought back to my mind the days when I used to sniff past an expensive perfumer's shop in Bond Street or the rue Royale, and as I touched my own jacket I felt that much of its former majesty had evaporated with the years beneath the constant brushing of the Pir, till now, in comparison to Hem,

I might almost have been wearing sack-cloth and ashes

"How are you?", Hem said to me as a high executive would inquire of a low-paid clerk at the annual Christmas party of the company

"I'm very well, thanks", I cordially replied

"I hear you're living like a hermit in a cave or some such place"

"Yes, I am—in a cave such as it is," I coldly replied

"And how's life treating our hermit?" Hem sardonically added

"By which he means to ask whether you have made any money," Beh caustically intervened

I didn't reply. Nor did Hem wait for my answer. He turned to Beh and pounced on his words. "You can't say money doesn't matter to you, Beh. You'd be a hypocrite if you said so after building a house like this for yourself. You couldn't live and be happy in a cheap little flat. Could you?"

"Don't people live in places smaller than this?" Beh asked

"Of course they do. But could you? Could I? No, Beh, we've got used to a certain comfort in life which we are in a position to afford. On it depends your happiness, your peace of mind. No, Beh, you've got to have dough."

Shades of Maxine! I thought. Only when Maxine said it, it was the struggle to get it that made it so fascinating to get. But when Hem said it, it sounded different.

"No, Hem," Beh said, "the sort of money you're talking of, one doesn't have to have"

Hem smirked, shook his head, his hands dropped in his side pocket for assurance, his legs moving with a reflex that indicated his attitude of contempt for an argument so pitifully unintelligent as Beh's. To answer it was beneath his contempt.

"What do you say?" Hem finally spouted with condescension, as he looked at me.

"I don't say anything because it's a little beyond my reach anyway. Perhaps I need less—or perhaps I can't afford more. So what's the use of theorizing on something I'm not likely to have?"

"Well", Hem agitatedly said, "what difference does it make? I spend on women and horses and on tough men whose company I keep. You buy books. Beh builds a house. Each according to his purse, if you'll pardon my saying so—without offence."

"A difference of degree", I repeated. Only the way I said it made Hem a little confused about its meaning and Beh looked at me from the corner of his eye and then disappeared to greet some more arrivals to his party.

"He's trying to become a socialist in his old age", Hem said, as Beh left us. "Poor Beh! It's pathetic to see a capitalist turn pink and read Marx and Kant and expound their theories at a party to warm a house like this."

All through this conversation the yes-man had not said a word and merely stood with his hands in his

pockets, looking what he was, pathetically unintelligent Hem did not bother to introduce us, nor did I think it mattered to the yes-man whether Hem did

“Boy,” Hem called across the bar, “give me a drink” And a waiter stood to attention “Got any champagne?”

“Yessur”, the Goan replied like machine-gun fire “Chumpin?”

“Get me a glass”

“Yessur”

“I didn’t think Beh would give champagne” Hem added half to himself and the rest to the yes-man and me And the yes-man smiled an unintelligent smile and Hem shouted for two glasses, and when they came, took one and merely pointed the other to the yes-man who picked it up, smiled at Hem and stood with it, as happy as he was before

“What do you think about the war?” Hem asked, surveying the room

“What can I say? If I could, I’d be a prophet”

“I’m only worrying about my frozen assets I got caught badly when the war started I didn’t think it would ever start And it would break me if any part of it was lost”

“You can spare it,” I added

“Spare it? I cannot Already this year I had to cut down my budget I sold most of my ponies Just kept twelve for my own use I’m only a bachelor and as I don’t go abroad during the war I can manage it, but I want what belongs to me rightfully, what my

father left me And every time I switch on my radio
I get the jitters ”

“ You think too much about it ”

“ In a way, yes But out here in India what
else can I do ? Baby, when I get back to the States, ”
and here Hem put on an emphatic American accent,
“ I ’ll make up for lost time The Cotton Club, negro
jazz—give it to me And the women ! Baby !—the
women ! ” And Hem ’s eyes sparkled And he
changed his tone again and said mournfully, “ And
what do you get here ? People talk of non-violence
and self-government and satyagraha Give me a hot
mamma every time Yauzur ! ”

And then our eyes fell on Beh at the other
end of the hall He was talking to Judy and Hem
strained his neck over the crowd on the floor to see
who she was and said to me “ Nice girl with Beh
Who is she ? ” And when I didn ’t reply, he turned
round to his yes-man, who meekly shrugged his
shoulders and felt apologetic he couldn ’t be of use to
his chief and indicated that she was perhaps beyond
the class of girl over which he had influence
and to which he could, as he often did, introduce his
chief

“ Well ” he said motioning to go, when I
didn ’t reply, “ some men are just fools ”

“ Some men are, ” I agreed and as he went away
I think he heard me say ‘ Silly ass, ’ because he stopped
dead, then changed his mind and walked away
And the yes-man followed

And the music stopped and Beh was still talking to Judy at the other end of the room.

Hem had walked in the direction of Beh and Judy, and half way across the floor, he said something to the yes-man who stopped following him from that point onwards and turned in another direction, still clutching the champagne his chief had given him. And Hem walked leisurely on. But I think Beh saw him coming nearer, for Beh and Judy moved away in another direction. Hem stopped as they went away and didn't go any further because there was no one left in that corner of the room, and then turned to join his yes-man to feel big again.

Beh brought Judy back to me.

"Are you glued to the bar?" Judy asked gaily.

"Don't deny me my liquor. I need it."

Beh ordered three drinks and when they came, he gave us one each and lifted his own, saying "I am going to give you a toast—to the nicest little girl who stepped into my house—bar my wife, of course."

And I lifted my glass and drank and Judy drank too.

"That was nice of you. You really make me feel very happy," Judy said and looked up at me and said "Thanks—Nineteen Hundred."

And I merely put my arm round her shoulders and lifted my glass to her and drank.

As the music began again, Beh turned to Judy and said "And what about a dance with me?" And

Judy looked up at me and I said "Of course—what are you looking at me for?"

And she shyly replied: "I want the first dance with you" Then she turned to Beh: "Don't misunderstand, Beh, but the first dance today is—well—I can't explain" And Beh immediately understood what she meant and took her hand in his and said: "Of course, I understand I'll have the next, may I?"

"Certainly," Judy said

Judy dragged me by the hand and in a moment we were both on the floor. Beh lifted his glass to us and drank.

"I hope he didn't mind," Judy said.

"No, he's all right He's a friend of mine."

"Is that a certificate or are you boasting?"

"Let's dance, Judy, don't talk I've got you in my arms again"

And the music played beautifully as if it was only for the two of us and it was a tango and I danced it the way I always did without a lesson and without a step In fact it didn't matter so long as I moved to the rhythm, because it was all an excuse of being close to Judy and she knew it and liked it. People looked at us I think they knew we were in love. Then Beh and Suni came on the floor and as they came near us Beh looked at Suni, his wife, and said to us: "This is *my* first dance," and he kissed his wife on her cheek and looked bright and smiled, and as they moved away Judy said to me. "He loves her too"

And so the dance went on and people were still coming along as people do at this sort of party.

The war had brought to this city so many new faces Troops passed through it on their way to some front in Africa, Libya, the Far East, the outskirts of the Empire Australian soldiers, reared in the bush, English soldiers from mill, farm, office and factory Indian soldiers from the North and the South The city was a half-way house for the cannon fodder of this great war

Many women too had brought with them new faces

Wives of Officers

Refugees, Jewish, Polish, Czechs, and Danish blondes

Evacuated women—escapologists—peeresses of the realm, and cartloads of English Misses—the cream of English aristocracy, culled from the backwoods of England

Matrons too—matrons in the uniform of ill-fitting gowns

They had all parked at some time or the other in the big city So many of these were to be seen at most parties in the big city, because the Indian was still a little partial to skirts, especially if there was an embroidered crest on it and because he believed that hobnobbing with the "haves" of England was a prelude to democracy—the democracy which they were fighting to defend, the democracy which stood for freedom in principle and freedom to preserve all that which

had in years become a negation of the democratic idea

Some of these birds of passage had strayed into Beh's party, through no fault of Beh whatsoever. Once during the evening Beh confided in me he didn't know some of the people in the party or even those who had brought them along.

The brothers Karan, for instance. Two lovely boys, not to be mistaken for cricketers even though they were Middlesex.

One lovely English peeress whose portly dimension proved the theory that every English nobleman must have a seat.

One other lovely Englishwoman, tall, aloof, flat-chested and like the lone palm at Juhu, inaccessible.

Capt. The Hon. Timothy Shuttlecock, of the Guards, the living portrait of a soldier-squire, thoroughbred, the sort of white man who turned his nose up at strawberry blondes and strawberry jam.

Indian Army boys, who had joined the exclusive profession of 'soldiery' because the Cavalry gave them infinite scope to play polo. Boys of "the right type" who believed that greasing the moustache was practising for greasing the gun. All these had abetted the housewarming of Beh's new home with gate-crashing.

Among the invited or as Beh put it "the necessarily invited" were baronets, knights of the Order of the British Empire, motor magnates, company directors, High Court Judges—and their wives of course—in fact all those who together would be

referred to in the next day's papers as "A representative Indian gathering" Beh had an obligation to Buda Ltd which he apparently tried to discharge, trying momentarily to forget the obligation to himself "Never before," Beh said, as he looked at his guests, "never again"

Of a different kind, however, was Sir Udul Boice He was a director in Beh's firm—an old man, with white hair, well in his sixties, who, rumour said, had accepted a knighthood because without it there was no peace with his wife Beh had once told me in confidence that the old man acquiesced in accepting the knighthood the same way as he agreed to the arranged match with his wife, in the days when marriages were arranged in India as part of the process of stud-breeding A brilliant old man in office, dynamic even at his age, with an uncanny grasp over every subject on which he laid his hands, he who had shaped the policy of Indian industry so often, he who had fought the Government on many a national issue, just completely changed the moment he appeared in the presence of his wife Years and years of married life had made him an appeaser, a peace-at-home-at-any-cost man A Churchill in the office, he was a Chamberlain at home

As I leaned on the bar alone, while Judy danced with Beh, Sir Udul came up to me, a Larranaga in his mouth, which he smoked with the air of a *bon viveur* merely wanting to burn up the name

"You are like me," he said, "looking for nooks

and corners The dark spots, where the limelight is not so glaring I hope Beh doesn't build any more houses for a while," he jokingly added, asking the Goan to get him a drink

"I am surprised at you, Sir—looking for nooks and corners"

"Don't you 'Sir' me I don't want to be dated I might have white hair and look old, but it's what I am inside that I want to keep young"

"Yes, I envy you that inner feeling"

"What are you grumbling about? At your age!"

"I'm not grumbling I'm just envying you what I doubt very much will be mine at your age"

"There's time yet Plenty of time You're just a chicken and I say it because I like you I always said so to Beh"

"Yes, Sir," I said, emphasizing the 'Sir', because it dated him so And he laughed a little and sipped his drink

When Beh finished dancing with Judy he brought her to the bar and when they were close to us, Beh said to Judy "And now I'm going to introduce you to a very bad old man - Be careful This is Sir Udul Boice—one of our directors" "This" Beh added, "is Judy", and then to me Beh said "I've brought her back safe and sound" And he disappeared to mingle with his guests

"He doesn't give me a chance", the old man said, "age and character both damned at the start"

" But I don't believe that of you," Judy naively replied

" That's the spirit," Sir Udul said, and then to me " Your little friend is kinder than you are Come on, let's sit down The three of us. In that quiet little corner over there, far from the maddening crowd Nobody will see us That is if I'm not intruding "

" Not at all ", I said reassuringly, " I'd love it "

And we moved to a little balcony on the side where it was darker and quieter and more secluded

From there we could still see the whole room because it was lit, and the people as they still arrived, but very few could see us unless they knew we were there

This balcony overlooked the now-darkened city

It was the time of the day when the little man in his little home had laid down to rest his tired limbs so that he could get up on the morrow fresh for the task that lay ahead of him—the pile of letters he would go through on his office desk, rushing in and out of his superior's rooms, carrying out instructions, adding up figures, selling soap or oil or cars or whatever was his job of work The black-out never did exist in the big city in the sense in which it existed in Europe Every one thought that his little light would not make any difference to the darkening of the city and the drone of the German bombers had not come within reach of our hearing Oblivious to these dangers, the little men turned in their beds even as little men had turned in their unmarked graves in Europe It

made no difference where you turned so long as you were either asleep or dead. And the big city was now only asleep.

"Look at it," Sir Udul said. "They're not even conscious of what could happen to them if the war ever came to us. It's just like India. I love it so much, but there are times when I feel disillusioned as I do now."

"Disillusioned about what?" I asked.

"About everything—the people, the politics, the leaders, the government, the future. For many years I have followed closely every major and minor political move, every reaction of the country. I've watched the early struggles you were too young even to remember. The launching of the nationalist movement. The awakening of consciousness. That early thrill. The realization of nationhood, and I felt proud of it all. I used to stand outside my window each night before I went to bed and breathe freely of the fresh air, before saying my prayers. To me it was symbolic of the freedom that this country would one day inhale. It was a grand feeling—a vision of a great democracy unfolding itself. Lincoln at Gettysburg, Juarez in Mexico, Gandhi in India. These are great moments in the history of democracy. And then like a thunderstorm came the war, and it shattered my ideals, even my vision. I could not understand this greater fight of a civilization, which was already free, in terms of our fight for freedom. I wondered how we would react, how our sense of

values would stand this impact with a force that knew no law but its own. And as I looked out of my window at night, I was bewildered with what I saw—a country sleeping in the midst of the great upheaval, unconscious of it, unbelieving, and still rooted to the idea that the answer to a bullet was the spinning of khaddar and the preaching of non-violence. And that's still where I am—bewildered, because I read and listen and know how it will end if we are ever doomed to deliver this answer to a ruthless, conquering foe. It is not enough to realize that our government has failed to do its duty to this country, if our conception of this same duty is no conception at all. That is where I stand. Betwixt nationalism and the British on the one hand, between nationalism and an unreal idealism on the other."

He paused for breath and I turned to watch the expression on Judy's face—that dazed look she wore, trying desperately to follow the words of the old man and an argument with which, in her little world, she was not familiar. Sir Udul watched it too and he took a deep breath and said to her "Sorry, child, I forgot you were here"

And Judy stirred a little as if she had awokened from a stupor. But she didn't utter a sound

"I never thought you felt like that", I ventured.

"I've never said it before. Perhaps coming out here on this balcony, I realized what I have vaguely felt all this time. Things come to you like that in a flash", the old man said and his voice sounded like a chant.

"Yes", Judy said, "I've felt like that too—I don't mean politics! I mean about things coming to you in a flash"

And from where she was sitting on the ledge she looked up to me, standing with my hands crossed and leaning on the rail

"Look at it", the old man said "The city It's asleep"

I turned and looked at it again—the big city with its little men

"And they're dancing here," the old man said

"Don't you dance?" Judy sweetly asked

"My dear—for fifteen years I've never wanted to dance I dance, but I've never wanted to Today when I saw you dance with Beh, I thought I'd come up and ask you You reminded me of someone I knew Not the face Just your youth—the way you moved, the way your hair falls, even the way you smile"

"Why didn't you?" Judy quickly said

"No—not now If I danced with you, I'd have to dance with my wife and her sister and then I'd be presented with a list my wife carries with her in her brain, all worked out in the order of precedence and my evening would not be the same Some day when I see you two alone, I will"

"Will you remember that?" Judy asked

"I will", the old man confidently replied

And my eyes wandered at that time to the entrance to the loggia which was far away and I

thought I saw a face I had seen somewhere before. He wore white tight *chundars*, which were like creased jodhpurs and a black coat which buttoned at the top—half-Indian, half-hunting. Brilliant buttons shone on its black surface and looked from afar like diamond nuggets which they probably were. He was short and stocky of build, and his face shone from where he was with a grease which covered his face and he bulged all over like only those who've lived on the fat of the land. He laughed with a cackle which could be heard across the gentle murmur of voices in that interval in which the band did not play and he talked to Beh as he came along, still shining with grease and sweat, still cackling like a brute.

I knew I'd seen that face before and I strained my eyes to see it closer, and as my hand fell by my side, I felt it grasped by Judy who was sitting at my feet and she held it tight as if she was afraid. I looked at her and her face was still. Now it was devoid of all expression, betraying one emotion which was fear. I quickly looked back at the man in the black coat and the *chundars* and again at Judy and she nodded her head to me and I was still unable to connect the two. I tried to think quickly while the old man smoked and looked down on the city which was asleep. And I remembered Maxine's and the fat, perspiring Bania in the sharkskin suit at the gala night and how Judy had changed when she saw him come and a few things she said then. And I held

Judy's hand tight to tell her without words she need not be afraid

It was then that something made the old man turn round in his chair, perhaps because of the silence or perhaps because of the change in Judy's face. And in a moment he shouted "Beh", and Beh saw him and was moving towards us with the fat, perspiring Bania in the black coat and *chunidars*. To us the old man said "I am supposed to be dancing attendance on him. That's what I am here for. He's closing a deal with us. So help me out."

And Beh arrived with the Bania, who put out a paw and said "Ah! There you are, Sir Udul!"

"Good evening, Your Highness", the old man replied and shook hands. "These are my friends", he added, turning towards us. His Highness nodded affably to me and then at Judy with equal grace and then looked at her as if he had suddenly noticed her face and his expression changed and he nodded again, this time somewhat gruffly. And Judy kept seated and looked down and turned her face away to the city.

"Let's get a drink", I said to Judy, making an excuse to break away.

"Oh, no!" His Highness quickly retorted "Don't make me feel you're going away because I came"

"Not at all", I replied, "we've been wanting to have a drink"

"That's easily arranged," Beh unfortunately interrupted, "I'll get them for you" And he darted away before I could say a word

“ Well, Sir Udul ”, His Highness said without any point

“ I wondered whether you’d come You were so late ”

“ Yes, I did not have the intention of bringing my presence here ”, he said in his awful pigeon English on which had been grafted a drawl, “ but I am intensely happy to have done so Much that I would have missed ”

And he broke out into the cackle again

“ After all that is the spice of life—variety and women and surprise, ” His Highness cackled all over again

“ Yes, of course ”, the old man politely said but didn’t really mean it

“ Is that not so, Dee ? ” His Highness said, addressing himself to Judy And the old man knitted his brow, surprised that the Bania knew Judy, but he did not show except to me what had passed through his mind I was anxious and a little afraid of what Judy would say Without looking up and without emotion in her voice, she replied “ I suppose so ”

“ By the way ”, the old man smartly interrupted, “ there are some people who wanted to meet you, Your Highness Asked me to introduce them to you when you came Shall we go ? ”

Perhaps Sir Udul betrayed a little too much that a change was necessary, for the Bania was adamant and coldly replied “ They shall wait I am in no hurry So far I have got everything I want in life.

I will get it. They can wait They all want only my money in the end ”

“ That’s ungenerous of you,” the old man retorted. “ There are so many nice people in this world, I am only just beginning to meet ” And as he said these last words he looked at Judy, still sitting on the ledge and looking morosely down

But the brute did not reply. He merely cackled again.

Quickly Judy got up and said to me. “ I’m not feeling well Let’s go.”

“ Not well ? ” His Highness said in a peculiar sort of way. “ Too bad, you feel sick when you see me—the man who has....”

Judy gave a strangled scream which drowned his last words and she dropped like a log at my feet.

“ Judy.....Judy ”, I said, holding her up “ Please quickly ”, I said to Sir Udul, “ she has fainted. Some cold water, quickly ” But before the old man could move, Beh was on the scene, trailing a Goan behind him He saw Judy on the floor and rushed asking : “ What’s happened ? What’s happened ? ”

He knelt down beside her and felt her pulse. “ Get me some water ”, I said.

And the old man picked up a jug from the Goan’s tray and I sprinkled the iced water on Judy’s face and she moved just a little.

“ Is she all right ? ” the old man’s voice said.

“ She’ll be all right,” I replied.

“ But what happened ? ” Beh persisted. And

when I didn't reply, he looked up at the Bania in the black-coat and at the old man, who asked me again with an anxious ring in his voice "Is she all right?"

"She'll come to—in a minute", and I sprinkled more water on her face.

"But what happened?" Beh said once again.

It was then that I heard the old man's voice "I think you were disgusting" And Beh looked up and saw the old man, his hands in his pockets, facing the Bania four-square "No gentleman would have said that to any girl I think you were disgusting"

But His Highness merely cackled with laughter

"I don't think it funny," Sir Udul said in a firmer tone "I think you are ill-bred"

"But she is just an ordinary, cheap. . .", His Highness cackling replied

He hadn't finished, when Beh stood up and getting the measure of him, said with dignity but firmness "Get out of my house, Your Highness"

"I beg your pardon", His Highness retorted with pompous arrogance, taking offence

"You heard me, Your Highness, get out of my house If I have to say it once more, I'll shout so loud, the whole party will hear me"

Beh grabbed hold of the fat Bania's coat near the nuggets that were diamond buttons, and shook him, and chewing his words, said "And if ever you utter a word about this girl again, or say another word to anyone else and I hear about it, I'll bash

your face in Understand ? I'll bash your face in " And Beh shook that bloated piece of ugly humanity, which toppled like a blanc-mange jelly " I'll bash your face in," Beh repeated, " My God, I swear it", and he shook off the fat brute like you shake off dirt

" You'll be sorry for this, Buda And our business relations are at an end "

And again Beh caught hold of him and repeated, showing a clenched fist " Understand ? I'll bash your face in, you swine ! "

His Highness was taken a trifle by surprise It was obvious from the way he fumbled for his words He merely pulled down his coat, swung around and disappeared down the loggia, through the entrance from where he came

" Phew", the old man said, as the fat, greasy brute went away and wiped his nose with his hand-kerchief and phewed again " I never did like the idea of associating with him "

Beh bent down again and Judy had gradually come to Her eyes flickered and she looked round

" Hello, sweetness Feel better ? " Beh asked

" Where is he ? " she enquired, frightened

" Don't worry, Judy," Beh replied, " he'll never bother you again "

And Judy looked all round and caught the old man's eye and he bent down from his chair and smiled at her and she said to him . " It comes and goes in a flash," and she lay quiet again, prostrate on the floor

CHAPTER NINE

NO ONE else from the party saw or heard of what took place on the balcony. When Judy was conscious again, we took her into Beh's study, where she rested for a while on the divan, looking like a large white-ant in a room full of books. She was a little uncomfortable and continually repeated half to herself and half to Beh, "I shouldn't have come, I shouldn't have come," and she asked me more than once to take her home.

Once Beh said, "Don't say that Judy. It's I who should apologize to you for the behaviour of my guests."

Once, too, the old man who had followed us into the room, bringing with him Judy's handbag, which lay on the balcony floor, said, "Listen child, the world is full of dirty, odious people. You must never let them hurt you. You must look forward, Judy—to the future. And on your way to a new happiness, you must not stop to look behind."

But all this was of little use, because Judy just wanted to get home.

And I decided that would be best.

Judy wanted to leave the party quietly and so we didn't go through the loggia, but smuggled ourselves out by another way, through the bedroom adjoining the study, to go downstairs where the two-seater was waiting for us. Beh and the old man came to leave us and as we were about to move away, Beh said to Judy "Come again, Judy. My home is always open to my friends."

She was still in a sort of daze and kept brushing her hair back with her hands, and now and again she would take her handkerchief to her eyes, but I didn't think she was crying. There was not much I could say either, and as we moved out, I waved to Beh and the old man and they knew that my silent greeting was best under the circumstances.

As the two-seater purred out of the compound, Judy darted for my arm, leant her head on my shoulder and I heard her say in a frightened tone "Don't leave me, Nineteen Hundred." And I lifted my left hand off the steering wheel and put my arm round her and with my shoulder I lifted her chin and brought it near to me and kissed her cold shivering face.

"Judy, you're cold and perspired."

"I'm not feeling too good."

"Let me take you to a doctor."

"Take me to the garret. It's closer. And I'll be all right after a while."

I felt her hands and they were going cold.

"Judy!" I loudly exclaimed, "Judy!"

And very feebly she said something I couldn't hear. Her body was getting limp and her hands and forehead were cold with sweat. I stepped on the pedal and shot through the darkness at breakneck speed to the garret and as I approached it I noticed a light in the flat of Dr. Felix D'Souza and his pink and white striped pyjamas could just be seen stretched V-shaped across his easy-chair.

"Doctor," I yelled out, "Doctor D'Souza."

And the pyjamas stirred and the figure of a man stood up, a book in his hand and he leant over the verandah rail and a voice was heard saying "Who is that?"

"Doctor, just come down for a moment. Quickly. With some smelling-salts."

"Orright" the voice said.

In a few moments he was down and we laid Judy flat on the seat of the car and the doctor cracked a cube of Amyl Nitrite, which he wrapped in a handkerchief and Judy stirred almost as soon as it was put to her nostrils and she looked round a little perplexed.

"Don't worry, Judy," I said, "it's only the doctor."

"Where are we?"

"Home—my garret, Judy. I'll take you upstairs."

"Yes, we must take her upstairs soon," the doctor said.

"Come, Judy," I said, "catch hold of me round

the neck I'll carry you upstairs "

" No," she said, " no, you mustn't I'll walk "

" She shouldn't walk," the doctor interrupted

" Of course not, doctor Come on, Judy "

I lifted her out of the car, while the doctor fetched the bag and switched the lights out and I carried her slowly up the two and a half flights of stairs to the garret and laid her frail body on the bed And the doctor—still in his pink and white pyjamas, and with his gold-rimmed spectacles, sat down beside her and he took her pulse

" What happened ? " he said after a while

I explained briefly that she was upset and that she fainted at a party and again in the car

" There's nothing wrong," he said to Judy, " Just a little exhaustion Or an emotional upset, perhaps But one must be careful You'll have to be quiet and rest Better if you slept here tonight "

He said this in the most ordinary, matter of fact way, speaking like a medical man rather than an inverted prude

" Can you do that ? " he continued in that same medical tone, addressing his question to Judy as much as to me

" Would you like to do that ? " I asked her, because I knew that more than anything else she should be allowed to do as she felt Probably she'd like to be with Johnnie, I thought

" Yes," she meekly replied

" That's nice," the doctor intervened, smiling at

her, "don't worry about anything I'm just down below and you can send for me at any time of the night Don't worry I think you're a little upset I'll go down and get you a dose of something to drink and you'll feel much better after that "

But Judy lay quietly and nodded

Dr Felix D'Souza got up, pulled down his night-coat a little as if to apologize for his attire and went out

I followed him to the door

At the landing he paused " Is there any reason for her fainting ? "

" Yes, doctor, she has been upset "

" I just wanted to know as a doctor Nothing else — is there I mean, anything physically wrong to worry about ? "

I laughed a little

" No, doctor, it's not a baby she's expecting, if that's what you mean "

" That's all I wanted to know But even so, it would be better if she stayed with you You shouldn't let her go, if that is possible "

" I'll keep her here doctor "

" From what I can see it's her nerves that have been shattered If not taken care of, she'll have a bad breakdown Then it will take months She's highly-strung, sensitive — even though as a person she's outwardly placid The type of the girl that keeps too much within her till it bursts I don't want to interfere in your affairs, but if you could show

her some kindness and be gentle to her, there's no other medicine that would be as good She's sad I can see that I think she needs careful looking after and nourishment of the right sort She shouldn't worry The atmosphere round her should not be one of struggle as it seems to be now Am I right ? "

" Yes, you're right "

" I didn't say this to her because I didn't know whether you'd care to take the responsibility "

" There's no responsibility I wouldn't take "

" Yes, that's what I wanted to know You make my task much easier Now I'll go down and get her a little stimulant to put her right I'm coming up again "

As he went down I said, "And doctor your fee?"

But he rushed down the stairs waving his hand
" No fee "

I didn't like to pursue that point just then, so I came back to Judy and sat by her bedside She was wide awake, her eyes now sparkling But the rest of her was tired She seemed to have given up the struggle—the struggle for her happiness, the struggle for the future Physically at least she was dead beat and I think mentally too she felt the same

" Judy—do you feel any better now ? "

She smiled at me and with a flicker of the eyes she answered 'Yes'

" Wouldn't you like to say something to me ? "

She opened her eyes wide, looked blankly at the ceiling and put a hand over her head In the other

she held mine and caressed it "I love you, Nineteen Hundred I love you as I've never loved before"

"Yes, Judy darling I know it . "

"I want you so much for myself"

"And haven't you got me? I'm here All of me"

"Not enough"

"No one else has any claim on me, Judy"

"No one?" she quickly jumped on the word.

"No one"

"Not even yourself?" she asked seriously

"Not much," I smiled

"But I want you—all of you—near me always—with me—close to me—inside of me—body and soul I want it all"

She bit her lower lip, then turned over and hid her face in the pillows She took my hand close to her heart and then to her face and kissed it and even bit it slightly like a dog does with affection

How beautiful she looked—a picture in white, against which contrasted her hair, which were like black flax Yes, beautiful even as she lay, face downwards and on her stomach, her frail sloping back, thinning down from the shoulders to a delicate, shapely waist And then a gentle upward curve like a molehill, with hips that were shaped but didn't bulge, till they merged—shoulders, waist, body, bottom, hips and all into a delicateness of her legs You felt like stooping down and kissing her little body from the back of her neck to the tips of her toes

"Judy, my beautiful little Judy," I said to myself I think I was afraid of saying it louder

Perhaps it was as well, because the next moment the doctor knocked at the door and I asked him to come in From afar I could sniff a pungent aromatic smell like that of liquid ammonia which the doctor brought with him in a small glass measure and gave to Judy

He felt her pulse again and asked how she felt and Judy told him she felt better

"Now you stop worrying and relax That's most important"

"Thank you doctor You are very kind"

"That's the essence of my profession—though some of my learned brothers have forgotten it Yes, young lady, I am always at your service, whenever you want me You needn't hesitate to ring my bell at any hour of the night It's all I live for now To be of some service to humanity We took that vow twenty-five years ago My wife and I. We've kept it Yes, I feel happy when I can do something. Well, good night God bless you"

I saw the doctor to the door Again I asked him about his fee, but again he emphatically refused "But, doctor, I can afford it I would also feel easier about asking you again"

"My friend", he said, "if I had charged my fees throughout these twenty-five years I would have had a house of my own and I would have had a few cars and consulting rooms in smart buildings, but I would

have done little for myself and less for humanity
Don't argue this little point You must go back
to her "

" All right, doctor, thanks for your kindness "

" Let me know if I can be of any further use
Don't hesitate, good-night "

And quickly down the stairs he ran along,
this little old gentleman in his pink-striped pyjamas
and gold-rimmed spectacles, pit-patting with his
slippers as he went down And I came back to Judy.

" Do you want me to fetch anything for you
Some clothes, or Johnnie, or servant woman ? "

" No, it's not necessary I've already told her
that I would not be home She's been with me
ever since Johnnie was born, so I can trust her "

" I think you're sweet I like you when you
talk like that "

" No, I'm ashamed of myself," she coyly said

" Ashamed ? "

" Don't ask me any more Come to me, I want
you so much Take off this wretched dinner jacket
and lend me something of yours to wear "

I got up and from the cupboard I fetched her
the pair of dark blue silk pyjamas, which Beh
and Suni had given to me for my last birthday, and
which I never had the heart to wear On the pocket
were my initials embroidered in red silk and all
down the side of the pyjamas there was a little red
piping to match

It was this sort of pair in which Priam-might

have gone to visit Helen of Troy, or which the late Mr Mark Anthony might have worn as he climbed up the water pipe into Cleopatra's bedroom, the sort of pair in which little girls would have liked to see Mr Robert Taylor, the sort of pair a company-director bought to keep a "business" week-end appointment, different from the coarse pink-striped cotton pair of Dr Felix D'Souza, the sort of pyjama suit in which I should have appeared myself to pay homage for the first time to the temple that was Judy

But I preferred that Judy should have them and that I appeared as I normally did in the plain colourless thin cotton fabrics of my country's textile mills When I came out of the bathroom, changed, I saw Judy standing up in the dark silk pyjamas, amused at herself because the sleeves were much too long for her and the legs of the pyjamas trailed along the ground and the coat almost touched her knees

She flapped her arms round her body

" I feel like a scare-crow," she said

" You're not frightening me away "

" If I did I'd take them off "

" Judy ! What things you're saying "

" I feel so happy, I can't help it "

And I picked her up and put her on the bed and lay next to her

" You know you should lie quiet Relax, that's what the doctor said "

" Tell me, Nineteen-Hundred, you haven't said a word about what happened tonight Does it matter

what I've been ? For a moment I thought I'd lost you ''

“ No, Judy, there are certain feelings that don't just switch on and off What you are, I love, Judy What's happened to you makes what you are, more fascinating In you is embodied a spirit of struggle which attracts me towards you It is this inner attraction that will never die ”

I was lying on my back as I said this Judy who was beside me was resting her head on her raised hand and watching me intently as if she was following every twitch of my lips She didn't interrupt me as I spoke and when I finished, grazed her cheek against mine, her hair falling all over my face, soft black hair, shoulder-long, and with her eyes closed she felt with her lips for mine, like a novice fumbling with braille and when she found them she paused like a pilgrim before it enters the shrine and in that moment a new chord struck in me and all music of the soul poured out of this oral fount from which spouted the germ of love

I turned a little—towards her

She gripped my head, my ear, bringing me closer, closer to her, till it must have hurt My arms almost instinctively went round her and with the touch her whole body lit up in one flaming passion and it trembled like a body does in fright or in pain or in love Tightly she had closed her eyes and as she kissed she sighed and I could feel from beneath the dark blue silk coat her firm breasts heave in an aching hollowness of wanting, till her lips tore apart and

softly they muttered something and I could hear her voice whisper into my ear "Take me"

And her hand moved to unbutton my coat till it slipped inside, round my waist and touched the warmth of my flesh and I could feel her finger-nails as she dug them into my flesh And I felt for her, where my own initials were, above her heart, over the left breast, first with the dark blue silk between us and then when there was no silk but smooth warm flesh which tightened even more to the touch and a current more vivid than electricity passed through her, the tension of her body crystallizing into ripeness, like an ulcer just waiting to be lanced and gradually there was less and less silk around her and more of that smooth satin flesh

Then the pillows sank down and the mattress yielded to her form

Her shoulders, her waist, her hips, her legs pressed against the softness of the down And I searched for those unfathomed depths in which had been written the whole history of man And I found that aching hollowness of wanting within her and with the finding two aching tensions merged into one another Her thin lips came quickly back to mine and the rest of the world was shut out from that oneness which was ours

"Judy, my Judy", I almost breathed into her

"Yes, darling"

"Judy"

"Yes—Yes—Y-e-s"

And in the ecstasy of oneness we stayed clinging

to that wanting we both felt for each other—a wanting that grew with each moment like a sonata accelerating with each gathering movement, building up one single theme till every sinew of our two bodies reached that pitch and that depth towards which we were moving and towards that moment which could have been all eternity

“Judy!” I said once again as I felt that whole sonata strum out of me in a few breathless moments. And time, like our love, stood still. And Judy relaxed—as Dr D’Souza had said

There she lay by my side, her eyes closed, her hands limp by her side, breathing a little heavily, the curve of her neck a little strained and her lips betraying the anguish of her soul. Her body was at ease as if it had been rubbed with the balm of Gilead. Then I watched her eyes flicker and she opened them and looked at me. And from what seemed a great distance, compared with the closeness of a few moments ago, she said in a tired little voice “You’ve taken all of me. I’ve nothing more to give.” And I lifted my head a little and rested it on the palm of my hand and looked at this little woman that lay before me—this little girl I first saw in the blue, printed cotton dress—this little girl that used to gaze at the stars.

“You mustn’t think always of giving, Judy. Take also something from life.”

“To a woman it’s the giving that is the greatest feeling. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you

I've never given before like I've given now That's where the present is different from the past A woman is not always touched with every physical touch I don't know whether you understand me Nineteen Hundred "

"I do, my sweet You don't have to tell me"

"Have you known so many women before?"

"It's not the number that matters or gives a man his experience It's the depth of feeling—the intensity of each affair The more a man has loved and the more he has felt, the more capable is he of loving It shapes his attitude, it forms his sense of values It intensifies his feelings It casts a spell of what might otherwise be just another affair It sort of becomes a vital part of his life without which the rest of his living would be disjointed and would lack coherence Sometimes too it takes the place of a faith that is lost—faith which in olden days used to find a medium of expression in religion, nationality, country These were once the symbols of God—the only conscious forms we understood Gradually these forms have died Religion, with the cumbersome ritual in which it is enveloped, with its hide-bound, caste-bound, orthodox-bound interpretation appeals less and less to the sensitive man. Nationality is now no more a stable idea The world we live in is unhappy because of too much nationality There only remains one's country and even that is denied to half the world So what remains? The few individuals that meet by chance, by fate, by accident to live together a few

brief moments—sometimes more if they are lucky and if circumstances or environment or temperament do not part them earlier—in which if they find that common denominator which is after all the ultimate solution of the world's happiness, then at least for the time they are together they've found that faith which can sustain them through the darkest hour. Each man finds his faith in his own way as I have found it with you, Judy. Yes, darling, I sound strange, don't I?"

" You know, Nineteen Hundred, it's very funny but you're saying something I've been wanting to say for so long, only I didn't know how to say it. One day long before I met you when I was very sad and fed up with my life, with the giving up of my body so much that it became difficult to hold on to my soul, I said to myself that the day I find, if ever I did, that other feeling which I had denied myself, even if it was for a short while, I'd wear a little gold cross on a chain round my neck. Tonight when I told you that I had nothing more to give I told myself that I'd wear that cross, which even as a child in the convent where I was educated I adored. I used to see it hang on long chains on the nuns that taught me first how to read. As a child I often told my mother I wanted a cross, but she said it wasn't necessary, and if I felt religious I should go to church on Sundays. But I didn't want to go to church on Sundays. I wanted the cross. To me it said something all the time—something that was personal only to me. When I was

alone I wanted to play with it in my hands and I was happy even though there was no special reason for being so That was when I was a child, but no one encouraged the idea and I let it remain in the back of my mind always waiting for a day to come when I'd wear it round my neck—a small one which no one would see, not like what the nuns wore ”

“ Shall I give you that cross ? ”

“ Yes, I was going to ask you for it anyway You said I should take something from life ”

“ Yes, Judy—this is only the beginning I want you to have so much from life So much ”

And I bent over her, still limp but with her hands now behind her head, and kissed her lips with the same reverence as I'd have kissed the Cross To me she was the Cross—a tiny little cross maybe But she also had bled that man, her man, her little man Johnnie, should live What else was there in the Cross ?

“ Play some music for me, darling Play it as you did last time when I fell asleep ”

“ You remember that ? ”

“ Yes, it was the Ave Maria ”

I got up and slipped on my black dressing-gown with the red dragon on the pocket I had not heard any music on my radio since that night when Judy first came to the garret But only news, news, news News from war fronts, news of the varying fortunes of those that were engrossed in this grappling struggle for life and death News of the Middle East, from that desert strand where men fought with their last

breath to gain some strategic position in Sollum, Tobruk or Abyssinia. Or from the Arab land through which on camelback had once passed the genius of Lawrence. News of this war—fought by one side for *Lebensraum* and peace and by the other side for democracy and peace. The war for peace, in fact! These news bulletins were the funeral marches of our modern composers—the men of the Hood, the men of Dunkirk, the men who died in the huge craters of Crete. That was the music of this generation—the music we were destined to hear. Music that was written on the casualty lists, the dead being the flats and the wounded with their anguished cry being the sharps.

Yes, this was the music of our generation.

But this was no time for music like that. This was the time for the music of love or more correctly the music of afterlove.

Limp music

Of tired violins, whose strings had lost their brittle tone

Of a piano that only played a base

Of a melody which seemed lonesome because of a lost accompaniment. The melody of a sorrow that filled the heart—a sorrow that was akin to joy because of that filling.

Perhaps there was no such music. But I fondled with the knob of the radio till I heard some woman's voice faintly sing

And I tried to get it clearer, but it faded away

CHAPTER TEN

I GOT up early next morning Judy was still asleep On the bed she lay huddled in my dark blue pyjamas Outside on the terrace I could see across the sky a flicker of the rising sun The city, still much asleep, was awakening with the dawn Along the long road could be seen the first signs of life—the workman on his way, the red trail of an early morning bus moving against the background of green and grey So life began each day in the big city Only today I was on the terrace to watch it beginning

I sat on a cane chair and stretched my limbs Occasionally I would yawn and breathe in the early morning air, unmixed with dust and smelling slightly of the sea In a little while, the chicks would be down as was the custom of the garret and across this world that day at my feet would fall a curtain which would drive me into a seclusion all my own And then the street below me would change to one in Seville or London or Paris or whatever place I might have been dreaming of at that moment

For once I had upset the calculations of the Pir—both in the time for serving coffee and in the quantity

of it And as I thought of the Pir's entry, I got up and put a sheet over the little figure in the dark blue pyjamas, leaving only Judy's face and her jet black hair to be seen against the whiteness of the pillows and sheets Then I stepped out again on the terrace and as I settled down to gaze at the pale blue sky, I heard the rattle of doors and of bolts being moved and the figure of the Pir came across the flat He was looking straight at me as he came out and never once at the covered figure on the bed, which he must have noticed

He carried no coffee-tray

His pace was hurried, his face agitated, his countenance severe He came and stood before me speechless

I missed the smile with which he was accustomed to greet me each morning—the *salaam* which was his manner of first greeting I waited for him to speak He appeared confused He muttered incoherent words like '*pilaw*' and 'thanks' and when I asked him what he was trying to say, he pulled himself together and told me almost with tears in his eyes that the Khoja lady who stayed below was dead

"Dead!" I said loudly to myself

He explained that the servants found her asleep when they entered the flat to sweep the floor Usually she would be up while it was still dark and say her prayers on her sacred piece of carpet and sip her morning tea, which she was accustomed to make herself Today she was unusually late and as the

woman servant looked in the room, the Khoja lady was found peacefully at rest both in body and in soul

It was difficult for me to register any feeling except of surprise I had never laid my eyes on this old lady, and of her existence I was hardly aware except on days of the festival, when I would hear the chatter of conversation and the swish-swish of foot wear Only the night before, she had sent me a dish of *pilaw*, a friendly gesture that was to be her first and last—a gesture which I could never reciprocate, nor could I ever find the motive which prompted her to make the first move in what might have been an exchange of neighbourly courtesies Alone, this lonely soul had lived Alone, she had passed away, with no friend nor relative at her bedside Without a struggle, without a tear

The Pir told me that he recollects her conversation with him when he went down to acknowledge her gift on my behalf and how, when he had told her that I, his master, would thank her in the morning, she had said in a mysterious, cynical sort of way “There will be no need to thank me—tomorrow”

Perhaps it meant nothing Perhaps it did Only the Khoja lady would really know

The Pir asked for leave to attend the funeral to be able to shoulder the coffin, for though she was a Khoja and he was a Sunni Muslim, these were mere variations of the same fundamental idea—an idea based on Islam and standing for the brotherhood of man It was a brotherhood that believed in the

unity of prayer, the common sharing of sorrow, the eating off the same plate and this belief was inspired by the idea of the oneness of man. And as he explained the theory of his religion to me, I wondered whether the unity preached by Islam was not a unity that comprised the larger unity that was man, or whether it was an isolated unity that excluded all other life from it which was not based on the Islamic idea. What was it in Islam that bound two total strangers in a bond to share grief, to share food and to unite in prayer? It was, he said, a faith he could not translate. And then I asked him if he would have lent his hand to my bier—I, who was not of his faith, not of his religion and quickly he replied that he would give his shoulder for the carrying of any dead man whatsoever his religion, if the dead man's religion permitted him so to do.

There was something beautifully sincere in what he said. As I listened to him, I saw the boundaries of caste, creed and religion fade away. This was the common man of my country—the man that claimed no particular corner of the earth as his own, the man who knew no communal barrier, the man who only spoke in terms of fellow men. And I thought of those great lines of the mystic Donne, who said

"No man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main, if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were,

*as well as if a manor of thy friends or of
thine own were, any man's death diminishes
me, because I am involved in mankind; and
therefore never send to know for whom the bell
tolls, it tolls for thee"*

Yes, the Khoja lady's death had diminished me, and something inside of me felt the lesser as I heard the Pir tell me of her passing. With this thought, the Pir left me to fetch the coffee. And again I noticed he never turned to see who lay covered on the bed I suppose he knew, for he had seen Judy the night before, that I could not be found with someone else next morning. There can be something dignified even in an affair, which saves it from being indiscreet and immoral—a consistency of affection that makes a union between man and woman more sacred than does the sprinkling of holy water and the utterance of vows which are seldom kept. So long as this affection existed it was sufficient in the eyes of God, I felt, whatever it may have appeared in the eyes of conventional man. The sanction was the love, the wanting, the hollow aching, the mutual desire, tempered with feeling. The sanction of society, however, still required the signing over a cold, dotted line. Morality depended so much on the code one followed—morality that could never be laid down in a handful of hard and fast, hide-bound rules, morality that depended so much on the individual and the circumstances of each case. You had to be your own judge of your morals, and your conscience could be your only

guide, even though the punishment doled out to you would be according to the standards of society to which you belonged and in which you chose to live. Thus in some countries polygamy was traditional, in others they punished bigamy. It was like the way of the road. Half the world drove on the right. The other half drove on the left and I suppose both were right, so long as you did not try to merge the two ideas. You could choose where you wanted to live in the world according to the way you wanted to drive. That was why I chose to live in the garret, beyond the reach of the city, beyond the world of gossip and scandal, beyond the code that was laid down, chapter and verse, for the general consumption of the men in the city.

Before the Pir came back, Judy had stirred in bed. I could hear her yawn and make strange sounds such as one makes on awakening.

“Where are you?” I heard her say.

“Outside, Judy, on the terrace”

And I got up and went to her and sat by her side on the edge of the bed.

“Good morning, little lady”

She nodded her head

“Remember me?” I said, playfully

She nodded her head again

“Yes?” I asked

“Don’t be rude to me in the morning,” she replied, yawning

“You’re still sleepy”

" I want to sleep for hours more All day, if I can And tomorrow and the day after I'm so tired "

" Up you get," I said, lifting her from the shoulders, " and have some coffee first Up. up . "

" I've got nothing left in me "

" Not even a drop of life, darling ? "

" Life, yes You gave me new life But no energy Ooh ! That's all gone "

" The Pir will be back again with some coffee "

" Has he already seen me here ? "

" Yes, though he pretended he didn't "

" How shocking ! "

" Very shocking," I said, putting on an air of seriousness " But he'll be more shocked if he sees you a second time "

Judy jumped out of bed and I laughed because she didn't know the Pir could not be shocked at all—ever He was like a man who had seen the bombing of London and who would now hardly turn a hair at the breaking of a cracker

" And," I added, " he'll be more shocked if he saw you having coffee without brushing your teeth "

" I'd never do that," Judy protested

" I do—sometimes," I said " That's why he's shocked "

" You dirty boy ! Let me see " And she pulled my lips apart and examined my teeth.

" You've washed," she concluded " The tooth-paste still lingers "

And she dashed into the bathroom and I went out on the terrace.

As the Pi laid the coffee-tray on the table, I noticed the two cups and the toast-rack, well-polished, and the butter and the marmalade. The tray was different from the one in daily use and there was a lace cover on it. Judy came out, wrapping a spare dressing-gown of mine around her and looking finer than ever in its vast expnse. Her eyes still blinked a little and her hands she hid deep down in the side pockets. When she came on the terrace, the Pi put his hands together and bowed in the manner of a *tanaskar* strangely different from the other occasions on which he would *salaam* with one hand—and Judy somewhat instinctively did the same. Without a word the Pi disappeared back to his end of the flat and to his work.

Judy poured out the coffee and the Pi turned up again, this time with a note on a tray which he said came from the doctor down below. He gave it to me and quickly disappeared. I opened the note and read it aloud. "How is the patient this morning? Just let her relax as she wants. Nature usually takes its course."

"Nature did," Judy interrupted though shyly.

But I continued reading. "It's sad about the old lady."

"Which lady?"

"The Khoja lady downstairs," I said. "I was going to tell you about her."

"Dead?" Judy said

"Yes, Judy"

"Poor thing. And she was so sweet to us. Did you know her well?"

"No, I never saw her."

"Shouldn't you go downstairs and attend the funeral or something?"

"No, Judy. There are some people one has never seen in life, yet one knows them. Like an author whose books you've read. You have your own impression of the man from his writing. Sometimes an impression that is more valuable to you than a glimpse of the man himself. The glamour of the unknown is still fascinating. This old lady had something of that same fascination for me—something I respected, something I believed to be full of human kindness, tenderness and gentility. She never obtruded herself upon my life. She helped to make this garret what I've always wanted it to be—a sort of isolated retreat into which one allowed no trespassers. She respected my code of living, as I did hers. We never wanted to see each other because that was not important to our mutual existences. If we had ever met, I know we would have smiled. That was my conception of her. I wouldn't like to change that impression as it probably would if I saw her stretched out on the floor, cold and grey and even ugly and I might have lost faith in my other visions. I would be too disillusioned if she turned out to be somewhat different from my expectations—if she turned out to be thin and scraggy whereas I

picture her to be portly and dignified See what I mean ? ”

“ I don’t know Sometimes I don’t understand you Sometimes you talk and I listen because it is beautiful to hear you speak. But when you’ve finished and I’ve shaken off the spell of your voice, I find there’s little you’ve said which I remember.”

“ Judy, you make me sound like a gramophone record that plays quaint music ”

“ I think I listen to you without thinking But I like it ”

“ I like it too A man needs most in life that some one should listen to him, when no one else will ”

“ I’ll listen to you Always ”

“ You’re sweet,” and I laughed “ You’re really so very sweet ”

And Judy poured out some coffee for herself and plunged into the silence of the morning

As the sun rose and its warm rays penetrated the garret, the bustle of the city also accelerated Cars pulled up one by one and from them came Khoja women with embroidered slippers like those whose swish-swish I was accustomed to hear on days of the festival Mournfully they entered the house, while the men sat on chairs in rows downstairs They would greet one another by clasping both hands to convey the depth of their grief or more intimately in the manner of an Oriental embrace One fairly elderly man seemed to be the chief recipient of the sympathy of the mourners Some hours passed as

we watched them come in and fill the rows of chairs. Then I noticed the familiar figure of the Pir in a white *sherwani* and a red *fez*. As he approached the seated assembly, the elderly man rose and greeted him as he had done the others and I understood then the meaning of the brotherhood of man.

Then there was a sudden burst of wailing from the floor below. We could hear the voice of weeping women and the cry of a lone voice rising above the muted wail. It was the cry of a young woman who was calling to her dead mother. Then came the thud of feet as they descended the stairs of the garret. The men rose in their places and the Khoja lady whom I'd never see, began her last journey from the garret—towards the big city where she would be laid to rest.

We watched the cortege as it passed by—a large boxed coffin, draped with a red cloth and covered with white flowers. All the men who followed the funeral lent a hand in turn as was the Moslem custom and the procession entered the long stretch of road on its way to the burial ground in the city. Back to the city, she went. Back to the city—this dear old lady, to find that lasting peace after death. Back to the city, from which during her last days she had tried to escape. Back to the city, which lay before us.

"What a way our love is born," Judy said, "that in the morning we wake up to see a funeral pass."

"But what has that to do with our love, Judy?"

"May be it's nothing. May be it's a warning."

I'm not superstitious I am just afraid Afraid like I was of the stars when I leant back in your car that first night Afraid as I've always been And more than ever now "

" My darling, don't say that "

" But that's how I feel To me, now, Johnnie and you are all my life It's what I live for Once it was for Johnnie alone Now it's for the two of you. This old lady must have lived for something too It's got to come some day or the other That's what frightens me This knowledge that there's a destiny against which you cannot fight "

" Judy ! "

" No," she interrupted " Take me back to Johnnie He'll be all alone, my poor kid He cries for me sometimes Silly child ! "

And for the first time I saw tears run down her cheeks and she quickly took my handkerchief and wiped her face and added " I'm silly too I need you as much as he needs me "

" Come on, I'll take you back and you'll feel much better "

" You're not angry, are you ? "

" Angry—with you ? Could I be ? "

" Then you'll come for me again Fetch me from Maxine's I'm working there this evening "

" Of course, I will I'll take Johnnie for a drive if you want "

" Oh no ! Not without me "

" Can't you trust me ? "

"No, it's not that But the two of you, I couldn't spare you both—if anything happened"

"You're all nerves This morning's news has upset you, Judy You mustn't let that happen to you"

"What did the old man say?"

"Which old man?"

"At the party—yes, 'It comes and goes in a flash.'"

And as I left her, after we dressed, at the little house in Nestle Lane, I still didn't know what was on her mind

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I DROPPED Judy and on my way back, I looked in at Buda Ld. The amiable secretary with the Cambridge college-tie sprang to attention and told me that Beh was out, but that he had left instructions that should I phone, the call should be switched on to Sir Udul Boice.

"Then I may as well see him for a moment, if he's not very busy," I suggested.

"I'll find out," the dapper young man replied and he shot round his desk, flew past other tables which were lined side by side in that large room, till he disappeared into a room at the far end on which there was a brass plate with Sir Udul's name on it. He was away only a few minutes and as he came out again, he beckoned to me from afar and as I went in he left the room, closing the door behind him.

"How is she?" was the old man's first question, looking up from a heap of papers to which he was putting his signature.

"Much better, today."

"Did you see her this morning? Beh and I wanted to send you a note. But we knew you'd let

us know somehow You should keep a telephone
I couldn't do without one "

" I like it this way. Yes; Judy was all right this morning, till we watched the funeral of an old lady who lived on the floor below me That upset her a little, I think "

" It must have been the reaction after what happened yesterday Poor child I know exactly how she feels She's in love with you, I think "

And he smiled like a cynic

I didn't reply Nor did the old man expect me to

" I don't mean love in the silly sense of the word In her case it takes the form of great affection One of those deep feelings which one seldom experiences in life, but which makes a lasting impression "

Sir Udul paused for a moment and then continued " Yes, I know what it is to experience that sort of feeling I felt it once It was long ago She looked —or perhaps there was just a suggestion of a resemblance—somewhat like Judy Not the face so much, as the whole effect—that something elfish that you find in Judy Perhaps it was just as well, now that I think of it It would never have had a chance against a world that was so hostile to intermarriage as the world was in those days It's different today But human feelings were just as tender in my days My only regret is that I was born out of my generation and much before my time "

He picked up a telegram that lay beside him

Gravely he looked at it His lips trembled with emotion.

"What happened to her?" he asked himself the question "No one really knows," he replied. "I don't think anyone will ever unearth the debris under which she lies buried—a war burial, no mass, no service, no coffin, no grave What a world lies before us!" And again he paused for breath and with a deep sigh repeated "What a world! So fast moving, so agonized, so tortured What is happening today is news, my friend What will happen tomorrow can only be a wild prophecy What happened yesterday doesn't seem to matter I just can't sit here and watch the stagnation around me while so many innocent people perish for no reason at all I feel as if with each day that goes by, I'm sinking, gradually but surely, into a mire It drags me down It will suffocate me one day when I have sunk sufficiently down"

I didn't know what to say The tragic picture of this grand old man, whom I'd learnt to respect and who stood for so much that I admired in man—dignity, equanimity, poise, grace, smoothness of living, smoothness of temper—this dear old man was suddenly cracking up before me Here before my eyes had perished another soul like the old Khoja lady, though Sir Udul was still physically alive. But something had to be said The silence which followed was too uncomfortable So I ventured "It's no use

struggling in a swamp or in quick-sand ”

“ I’m not struggling ”, was his quick retort, “ I’ve nothing to struggle for My life is divided into two parts Reality and dreams In reality I’m a successful business-man, a good husband and a good father I’ve been these inspite of myself A sort of self-discipline has made me what I am In my dreams I’ve lived or at least tried to live those years which through timidity I had denied myself This ”, and he picked up the telegram to indicate what he was referring to, “ this was part of those dreams A shattered dream, but so beautiful nevertheless It belonged to a different world, a world of peace and beauty, a world of youth, a world of hope, tolerance and promise I’m not struggling any more, but it’s the frustration that makes me sore The realization that I can do nothing It’s not just a single individual but a whole world that cries out to me and I can do nothing ”

“ I don’t know, I think you’ve done a lot in keeping with what is termed political self-respect ”

“ May be, but it’s this self-respect that has cost a lot to keep Here was the only thing that really meant anything to me Perhaps I shouldn’t say that—nor must you ever repeat this outside these walls, because it’s an emotion I’ve kept to myself—an emotion which if expressed too blatantly would injure the feelings of others and I wouldn’t like to do that But I can’t keep it in me any longer Today my world is empty Today my existence in terms of

that world is pointless and I feel the remorse of conscience at not being able to do anything to save my world from shattering I sit here in this air-conditioned room in the second year of the war, while the only thing that ever mattered has perished without a murmur, without a chance to groan, without a cry or a tear Bombed! A split second between time and eternity! And in that split second a whole world changes "

There was a break in his voice With difficulty he controlled his emotions His eyes were now red and his nose too He took out his handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed it to his eyes Yet there was no melodrama, no hysterics in his behaviour He was as cool as I had ever seen him

" You know, perhaps my judgment is warped, but I'm beginning to feel that we've taken the wrong attitude in this war No one is more nationalist than I am in my outlook I've carried out my nationalism to its logical conclusion in every dealing of mine, in every order I've passed in Buda Ltd Today Buda's is an Indian concern, thinking in terms of India Yet inspite of all this I feel the attitude of this country to this war of 1939 is hopelessly wrong I don't blame it either Britain has shown that it can rise to great heights of statesmanship in all affairs except India Take this war with Russia I can remember the day when they resented the presence of the Soviet ambassador at the Court of St James's They wouldn't shake hands with murderers, the

British said Today they are fighting side by side—the British and the Soviet people And for what? For democracy! I know all that and how weak the British case is with regard to India But look at this—look at the human aspect of this war” And he picked up the morning paper that lay beside him from which he read aloud the headlines, “FIVE MILLION MEN IN A DEATH GRIP! Five million men on that one frontier alone The toll this war will take will be in millions And now look at this—also front page news—‘GANALAL MEHTA SHOUTS A SLOGAN’ That’s what is wrong with India We’ve lost all sense of values Our nationalism is emaciated by such puerile acts of demonstration Fight!—Fight by all means like we did in the other civil disobedience movements, but if you have decided not to stab Britain in the back—that is the phrase, isn’t it?—well, don’t spoil your case by shouting a silly slogan”

“ But, Sir Udul, you must also see the other point of view The higher morality behind this restrained protest If there was today a call for civil disobedience on a mass scale, it would be answered I have no doubt of that The whole machinery of Government would be paralysed There would be strikes and communal rioting Law and order would suffer The army in India would have to concentrate on preserving internal order instead of preparing itself for the greater problem of defence There’s something to be said for the attitude of restraint that has been adopted ”

"But must they shout such silly slogans? Against the largei canvass of five million men grapp-
ling with each other, it is pathetic. It is even
ludicrous," he said

"Yes, I don't like the shouting of those slogans
It lends itself to easy criticism", I replied
"Satyagali news is collected under the caption
of '*The Cranks' Corner*' I regard that as one
of the most damaging retorts to the nationalist
movement. But even at the cost of being laughed at,
those little men who shout silly slogans, as you say,
and who invariably land in jail make one great point,
which is that though this country will not hinder
Britain in its war affort, that war effort is not with the
willing co-operation of the Indian people. It's this
moral co-operation that still is our greatest weapon"

"But what difference can that make to Britain?"

'Materially none. But this war is not just
Britain's war. Britain depends on aid from others.
American aid is necessary to prop up the tottering
bastion of democracy and American opinion of the
isolationist school of thought takes every opportunity
to drive home the condition and status of India
within the framework of an Empire that has pledged
itself to fight for that one word 'Democracy'. So this
slogan shouting is not so silly after all. No, Britain
wants that moral co-operation in this war more than it
ever did. Yes, even this little India has its say,
because after all in a war against Nazi lies, the truth
must tell even against Britain. I'm no politician

I am not even interested in political theories and political values, but I am conscious of my nationality especially when that nationality is deprived of its rightful place in the new order which this world is fighting to achieve" To which Sir Udul replied

"That is your loyalty! Yes, we all have our loyalties It's agonizing for a man, specially if he is sensitive, when loyalties conflict as they do with me A loyalty to my country, a loyalty to humanity in general What place is there for those like me whose loyalties conflict? What haven is there here on earth? If I appear bewildered at times in what I say, it is because I am bewildered I can understand bewilderment in a man of your years, but hardly in a man of mine And, my God, how bewildered I am!"

He put his hands up to his head and held it tight, as if his brain was rattling inside and he wanted to steady it a little There was a pause—a silence in which I became a little anxious about his frame of mind I saw his eyes move towards the piece of paper which had brought bad news He looked up at me after a while and forgetting the transient problem of India and the war, his mind wandered back, racing through time, into the past

"It's strange," he said after a while, "but when I first saw your little friend, I was almost shaken No one I've ever seen in all these years has brought back the past so vividly before my mind's eye Beh told me this morning that he had seldom seen me lose my temper as I did last night I won't say that I got

almost as much as I care for Beh and Beh wasn't here this morning ”

He stretched out a hand and as I took it, I felt his warm grip that signified so much Gratitude, affection, deep regard, all these were in the palm of his hand

I left his room and wandered out, a little confused with what had happened in Sir Udul's room The atmosphere of the open office was more moist in comparison to the air-conditioned room in which Sir Udul worked I adjusted my tie and collar, but it was really my whole self that needed adjusting As I moved towards the exit door, I passed the dapper young man, with the Cambridge college-tie, grinning at me And in the distance Beh was just getting out of the lift

We met in the archway

“ How's Judy,” he asked

“ She's all right ”

“ Everything under control ? ”

“ Yes, thank God, nothing to worry about but, I say, the old man's hardly himself this morning ”

“ Who ? ”

“ Boice ”

“ Why, what's the matter ? ”

“ I've just come out of his room ”

“ Come to my room,” Beh said, moving into the office

“ Wait a moment, Beh ”

Just then the whole office stood still at the noise it

heard It was the noise of a revolver fired One single shot that rang through the whole building, its echo filling the air

“ My God,” I shouted

And Beh and I ran to Sir Udul’s room Everyone had moved almost instinctively in the same direction, and as Beh and I dashed through the office, Beh shouted “ Don’t go in—anyone ”

But the door had already been opened and I saw the old man stretched out on the table, his face lying heavily on a heap of papers and covered with blood

“ Don’t rush in,” Beh said to the staff, who stood mute and rooted to the ground “ Get a doctor,” he shouted again

Beh went towards the old man and lifted the head And I knew then it was all over

“ Have the door shut,” I whispered to Beh

My eyes fell on a photograph which was not on the table when I was with the old man In his left hand, he still clutched the telegram I used my presence of mind and removed the telegram from his hand and the picture from the frame

“ What are you doing ? ” Beh asked

“ I’ll explain later, but it’s best this way For his family and even for you ”

“ I’m afraid he’s finished,” Beh said putting his head back on the papers, while the blood stopped “ Even the brains are oozing out Why this ? He was my best friend ”

“ He was so depressed ”

But Beh was not listening

I put the picture in my pocket and then opened the door" The staff had gathered in even larger numbers The doctor had also arrived and I showed him in directly There was not much to be said or done, for when he felt Sir Udul's pulse, he shook his head

A murmur ran through the whole staff outside To them, who knew nothing of what I alone knew, the suicide of a director of Buda Ltd was incomprehensible With gaping mouths they looked on at the tragic sight of a man they had cared for so much, destroyed by his own hand—a horrid sight, such as they had never expected to see Blood was everywhere The doctor had now removed his coat, rolled up his sleeves and was trying to stop the blood flowing from the temples and Beh stood at the window of the room, looking mournfully down the street below

"You'd better inform the police", the doctor said, and I passed on the instructions to the Secretary with the Cambridge college-*tie*

Beh was at the window, crying like a child
I had never seen him like that before

CHAPTER TWELVE

A MOURNFUL stillness reigned over the city for the rest of that day

The evening papers carried the news of Sir Udul's death and the tragic circumstances in which he died. The Coroner had given his verdict of 'Suicide while of unsound mind'—an untrue comment on Sir Udul's death, for no one who had spent the last moments with him would have said that Udul Boice was of unsound mind. Bewildered, yes. That he had admitted himself, but there were so many hundreds of thousands of men all over the world who were bewildered.

War-struck, the ordinary man who loved peace and the simple joys of life could not help being bewildered when he saw the massacre of innocents, the vandalism, the utter destruction of all that he had learnt to regard as holy—his home, his church, his wife, his children. But for Sir Udul there was also an unhappy conflict raging within him—a conflict which tore his soul apart, till with the news of the death of a woman he secretly loved in his heart, the torture of the soul became unbearable and he des-

troyed his body to save his soul and mind But society had its own formula, from which for no man, however sane, would it ever budge And so as the men in the big city picked up their evening papers, they lifted their eyebrows at discovering that Sir Udul Boice, the great industrialist, the main prop of Buda Ltd, who had been with the firm almost from its inception, had ended his days in confusion and in a state of unsoundness of mind By comparison they felt big and their little minds became greater and more powerful than that of Sir Udul's which had been pronounced unsound But those who knew him realized that it was because of some cause unknown to them that Udul Boice had taken his life Those who knew him were too sure of the integrity of his character to doubt that his was an ignoble escape from some inglorious act Always they had respected his decisions without questioning and they did so now Among these was Beh himself He never asked me what had transpired between Sir Udul and me that morning Even when I tried to tell him what I knew, he showed a disinclination to hear my story And I felt it would be tactless to pursue it any further

That afternoon, when I got back to the garret I went to the kitchen, and taking a piece of sandal-wood, I wrapped the picture and the telegram round the little log of wood and put it into the lighted stove I watched it glow and fade away

I then rushed to meet Judy at Maxine's at the appointed time I got there just as the practice class

was over and the dancers were coming down the stairs. The Pathan saluted me—one of those very dignified salutes such as one can only get in the East. It was a salute that belonged to a world where *man* was the essence of living. Judy looked down from the window above and Maxine's exotic head with his long hair peered from behind her. He greeted me as you would a friend crossing the Atlantic from Cherbourg on the *Ile de France*. I knew what he was trying to tell me, for he was glad that Judy was now with me and that he was happy he had a share in the planning. I waited for Judy to come down, nor did she take long, for she hurried down the stairs jumping two and three steps at a time. I knew from her face that she had seen the evening papers and that she was a bundle of nerves, more nervous than she was that morning when we watched the cortege of the Khoja lady. She opened the door and jumped into the black two-seater beside me.

“Don't say anything now. Just drive on till we get to the open road.”

I complied with her request and she hung on tightly to the door as the black two-seater ate up the road. Half-way down the drive she spoke again.
“What happened to him? Did you find out?”

“I was with him till a few minutes before the very end. I was the last person he ever saw. In fact I've been all day at Beh's office. Questioned by the police and then trying to be helpful to Beh. It has been a terrible day. I don't know how I even

managed to get away in time to meet you, but I knew that if I didn't come you'd understand "

" It was only between dances that I picked up the paper at Maxine's and read the news I couldn't believe it "

She crept a little closer to me for it was dusk and just beginning to be night and she knew no one could see her or me

" But why did he do it, do you know ? "

I told Judy the whole story, knowing she would never repeat it to anyone else I told her about the telegram and the girl and how it all happened, leaving out the part where the old man had spoken of a resemblance between them May be in her nervous state of mind it would frighten her, I thought Nor was it really pertinent to the story and the old man's death I was also a little superstitious myself But I told her how I took away the telegram which was in his hand when he was dead and the photograph too

" What was she like ? " Judy asked

" It was a picture taken ten years ago The fashion of that time was different, but she was beautiful Very beautiful," I said, emphasizing the last words and looking at Judy to see whether the resemblance was really there It was and it grew more on me as I kept looking at her

" Have you got the picture at the garret ? I want to see it "

" No, Judy I burnt it with sandalwood "

"Burnt it?" she asked, a little surprised at my haste

"Yes, darling, it was his secret and I felt he did not want it shared by the world. I wrapped the picture and the telegram round a little piece of sandal-wood such as they use as offerings in the Pāisi temples of worship and I put it all into the kitchen stove. There was a flame, as the paper caught fire, like the flame of his love for her. And as the paper turned to ashes, the flame died, but the sandalwood burnt on, smouldering slowly at first, then glowing with the embers with a soft mellowness that mingled with the incense of the burning wood. It was like his life and his secret love—it had a fragrance all its own."

"He came and went in a flash—like he said only yesterday. I'll always remember those words."

"He spoke of you, Judy, even when he knew he was to die."

"Why do I always bring death and disappointment wherever I go?"

"Don't say that!" And my voice rose as if I spoke those words in anger. I probably was angry too. But I controlled myself and in the next moment in a more hushed tone repeated "Judy, you must never say that. Silly child. Come near me."

And like a frightened dog she came even closer and snuggled into my shoulder as she had done before. But she didn't utter another word, while I drove past the beach over the hill towards the long stretch of road that led to the garret. Sometimes she would

throw her head back and gaze skywards but the stars had not yet appeared and the canopy of the heavens looked bare without them

“ How is Johnnie ? ” I asked, chiefly to change the subject

“ He asked me all sorts of questions today Asked me where I had slept last night I said I slept at home He said ‘ No, you didn’t mummy Your nightie was still in the bag ’ ”

“ What did you say ? ”

“ What could I say ? Then he said ‘ I know where you slept ’ And I changed the subject but his mind wouldn’t budge He asked about you and whether you were going to take him in your car again ‘ I like him too,’ he says to me ”

“ Too ? ”

“ Yes, that was significant He’s a precocious kid I have to be careful with him ”

“ Where do you want to go now, Judy ? ”

“ To the garret I don’t feel like going anywhere today ”

The garret was not very far I could see even in the darkness the faint lights of my room Like a promontory it stood out on a sort of hillock all its own, jutting out over the waters of the high tide Nothing else stood out in the whole panorama that was in front of us—not a house, not a tree This was the only blob that silhouetted itself so prominently against the night The black two-seater slowed down as we arrived at the end of the long stretch of road and

turned into the dilapidated archway which was the entrance to the garret I pulled up outside the garage and we got out of the car

I thought I heard a shout and Judy thought so too We imagined it was some part of the ceremony left over from the morning for the peace of the soul of the Khoja lady But there was no trace of any mourners now nor a light to be seen on the second floor The shout and the sound of a loud voice was raised again and there was no mistake about it this time We were nearer too--almost at the bottom of the stairs You could hear the words They were words of abuse Strong words Foul abuse A woman's voice yelled " You bastard ! "

Judy grew very pale in the face She appeared frightened and drew back a few steps I caught hold of her hand and we walked up the stairs slowly, keeping an eye on the door of Dr Felix D'Souza

And then the woman's voice broke out again " I told you....I told you I'll give you to the police Let me go ! "

It seemed a monologue for no one else spoke Again as we reached the landing of the first floor, the woman said " Call yourself a doctor—Ha!—you're a bloody something something "

Judy quickened her step, for the woman was shouting so much that the whole house quivered with the echo Judy had just passed the landing and climbed the second flight of stairs, when the voice was heard again " And you too Get out of my house, you

dirty little bitch ! You slut ! ”

And then for the first time I recognized a male voice, which was unmistakably that of the doctor.” “ Don’t be silly, Mary You’ll kill the girl. It’s not her fault, Mary ”

And suddenly the door was thrown wide open and I stood watching, for the girl stood in the foreground, barely fifteen—a dark, swarthy servant-girl, with a frightened look in her face, out of breath and crying She stood near the entrance, and I could see the doctor struggling with the old woman inside, wrestling to snatch a soda bottle that was in the old woman’s hand The frail old man grappled with the woman, who kept yelling as she struggled foul words of abuse

There was a crash The bottle smashed on the floor. A full bottle of soda that exploded, its pieces shattered all over the room, and with the explosion the woman sank to the ground, the doctor trying vainly to hold her up

“ Mary, Mary,” he kept saying to the oldish woman in his arms almost with affection which was strange in view of the woman’s behaviour

“ Mary ! Mary ! ” he said again, kneeling on the ground, beside the prostrate woman And then he turned to the little girl at the door and mumbled something in Goanese that sounded like “ Oodoc ” and the girl rushed in, leaving us to look on, bewildered at what we saw

“ Come in,” the doctor then said to me “ Don’t

be frightened, come in," he calmly added

I stepped in, cautiously, because I was afraid, but first signing to Judy to go upstairs to the garret as I didn't want her to get mixed up in the sort of brawl I'd witnessed

"Come in," the doctor repeated, "don't be afraid It's my wife I'm afraid she's now beyond repair"

The little dark girl fetched a glass of water from which the doctor sprinkled some on the woman's face

"Mary!" he coaxingly said, as he splashed it harder and harder, till the woman stirred and gradually opened her eyes and moved her hand to her head

"Mary! It's all right now," the doctor said

The woman opened her eyes wider and wider and scanned the room Her eyes fell on me and I observed a most ghastly vacant look in them They didn't register anything, but merely wandered round the room

She breathed heavily

The frail old man and the little girl helped her to sit up and then I felt I also ought to do something, so I helped and we raised the woman to her feet and she staggered a few paces across the room to a bed by the wall, where we laid her and the girl lifted up the woman's feet, while the doctor adjusted the pillows

"There you are," he said, "gently, gently, gently"

And he stroked the woman's hair and his hand grazed her cheeks, trembling, from what I could see,

like a man who was shattered with age and nerves Then he signed to the little girl, who darted across the room and fetched an old leather bag which the doctor laid on the bed and opened From it he took a syringe and a needle and some odds and ends, a piece of cotton wool and a spray of ether

She merely gave one single groan as the needle pierced her loose flesh Her arms, I noticed, had been pierced at many points and were merely skin and bone now But he handled her gently and rubbed the point where the needle had pierced when the injection was over

Then he turned to me and with a look of sadness in his face, said "Morphia! It's all I can give her now Poor Mary"

And he left her, lying in her bed with the little girl looking on, frightened, and staring at the haggard face and trying to brush back the old lady's dishevelled hair And the old man walked away from her towards his easy-chair in which I had so often seen him from the road, wearing as he did now, his pink, striped pyjama suit

I looked on, a little lost at what I had seen and unsure of what I should do I waited The old man sat himself down in his easy-chair and put up his legs Then, as if he had forgotten me, he uttered with a jerk "Don't wait Thank you, my friend "

I took the hint and quietly left the room, closing the door behind me and went upstairs to Judy, who was anxious and waiting for me

"What happened?" Judy asked, opening the door as she heard my footsteps

"I really don't know"

"But what did you do when you went in?"

"Nothing really. Just helped the old woman up. It's his wife. She had fainted."

"Fainted? But she . . ."

"I suppose she's off her mind from what the doctor said"

"What, mad?"

"I suppose so"

"Really mad?"

"I don't know. But he seemed to understand her behaviour. He was so touching and gentle with her. And when she regained consciousness, we helped her to her bed and he gave her morphia."

"And then?"

"Judy darling, don't get excited. You're trembling," I said, feeling her hands. "These things happen. You must take life as it comes."

"What, everything? First the Khoja lady, then Boice, and now this No!"

"Judy! I don't know what happened downstairs. So don't worry now. We'll find out. It's not your worry or mine."

"Isn't it? After all they are poor people and they live in the same house. How can you?"

"Yes, Judy, but I've always lived alone and aloof, living a life apart—so that the rest of the world wouldn't keep touching me at every moment of my life."

That's why I came to live here, far away from the city, from my friends That's my life, Judy "

" But that's selfish "

" Selfish ? "

" Yes, isn't it ? "

" Selfish we have to be sometimes to preserve ourselves It results from a fear of being hurt oneself It is a form of selfishness that is understandable It is the isolationist view of life "

" Don't use such big words But I still think you are selfish "

" Not really, Judy But there are two ways of living life With the flood and apart from it With the flood, you are sometimes on the crest of the wave—the top of the world But like the wave it rises and falls And once you lose that hold, you are lashed about wherever the wind and the rain choose to take you And that's not a nice feeling But apart from it—away, aloof, you can see the rise and fall and yet remain only an untouched observer "

" Is that how you feel about me too ? "

" No! Judy That was one time I forgot my principle of living! It happens like that too It's an inexplicable force, they call it fate, which predominates over the will of man "

" I don't know what you are talking about "

" Never mind," I said " But you're sweet when you look so confused "

And I gripped her as she stood before me, her hands playing with the lapels of my coat And

round her waist, in which was concentrated all the femininity that was woman. And then I felt, as I always enjoyed feeling, the curve of her back, till my hands reached the back of her neck and I pressed it forward, her head coming nearer to me and my fingers ran up her jet black hair, till I could feel her scalp And her lips came nearer and they quivered and I kissed them till they stood still

“ Was that love or fate ? ” she asked
And I couldn’t give her an answer

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JUDY didn't stay that night with me and I was glad she didn't. The world around me, the world into which I had brought her, believing it was a world that would remain untouched, was so upset that I wanted her to go back that night to her little home in Nestle Lane, back to Johnnie and back to the city. I felt caught in the mesh of fate and my one move away from aloofness had involved me in the lives of other people.

Never before had I bothered about them.

My people were those who were far away—those whom I imagined to be still walking below my window. Below my window—where I thought there still was a street of the Seville before Franco, in which a one-time matador walked arm-in-arm with his heavy-hipped, scarlet-lipped Carmen, a rose or a comb stuck in her shiny black hair, a mantilla over her head and a dress that fell loosely over her disproportioned torso. Or may be there still was the rue Git-le-Couer, in the thickest web of the Quartier Latin and across its narrow width I could still see the hungry painter Franz working on his nude the third he had

painted that month—all alike, all haggard as his women were, formless except for the stoop in their backs and the rotund nether parts, the hunks of flesh below the hips which were the foundations of his pictures and their frame. Or may be my windows overlooked the other Paris—the Paris I never would believe had been overrun by hordes of pagan Huns, the Paris that had both soul and sex and where in the *bistros* the little Frenchmen would sip choice vintages of the Bourgogne, delicate clarets, cool champagnes, mellow, warm and ancient cognacs. Gracious living! Part of the heritage of a free France. Or was it London below—Piccadilly Circus with its neon lights flashing on and off what once were landmarks of the great metropolis—now undistinguished and undistinguishable debris reminding one of the total war?

Did Flossie still lean on that lamp-post by Swan and Edgar?

Did Trixie still walk at tea-time, her breakfast time, with the little white Pekinese, out of the archway into the restaurant on Regent Street?

Did buses groan and puff and smoke as they turned round the statue of Eros?

And did Rolls-Royces still purr at nights down Shaftesbury Avenue or Coventry Street on the first night of a Cochran revue?

Were they all still below my window?

Or was it per chance San Christobal de la Habana that stalked the pebbled courtyard down below,

where only that morning the mourners had come and sat out of respect to the old Khoja lady, who had lived and died, but whom I'd never seen

“ Oh ! Judy, Judy, what have you done to me ? ” I seemed to cry out to myself in the stillness of the night—alone, because there was not even the Pir to keep me company, and Judy had gone back to the city

Back to her home in Nestle Lane

Back to Johnnie

And it was this consciousness of being alone that worried me. I had never felt like that before Lonesomeness was part of my daily life. It was all my life. That day as I sat on the terrace, watching the constellations move, I first became conscious of that isolated existence and felt uncomfortable in the presence of myself

But it was not for long. For around ten that night, there was a knock at the door. The bell didn't ring, but the knock persisted and I opened the door and found the doctor in his pink, striped pyjama suit—a shadow of the shadow that was his normal self

“ Come in, doctor,” I said, as the old man staggered in, his gait unsteady, his breath smelling heavily of alcohol

“ May I ? ” he said, affecting an old-world politeness that comes only to a man in movements of dignified inebriation

“ Yes, certainly I was so alone ”

“ Where’s your friend ? ”

“ She’s gone back to her home and her child ”

“ Child ? ” he looked surprised and drew out the word as long as he could stretch it

“ Yes, doctor, she has a child ”

“ How nice to be able to reproduce oneself with the labour of some one else ”

I didn’t reply because I wasn’t sure of his implication or whether he believed this was my child

“ Isn’t it ? ” he persisted

“ Isn’t what ? ”

“ Isn’t so with all mankind—or shall I say all men, for it is woman that bears the brunt of reproduction ? ”

We walked out to the verandah such as it was and the doctor sat down on one of the long cane chairs and stretched his tired legs. It was obvious he didn’t expect any answer from me to the questions he seemed to ask himself

“ What about a drink, doctor ? ”

“ Yes, ” he replied, “ I feel I can take another one. It numbs the feeling in me. But I like it because it numbs the pain too ”

The Pir had left the glasses out and the decanter, a ritual of the garret as I said before, and I merely fetched the cold soda for the doctor and poured him out his drink

“ She won’t live long, you know. Not long now. It’s gone too far. Poor Mary ! ”

I sat and listened to the old man as he lay back in the cane easy-chair, his legs outstretched

" We've come a long way together, but I didn't think it would end like this Thirty-six years of married life I knew her when we were kids We came from the same village in Panjim We were poor and my father died when I was very young It was my mother who brought me up We were three of us—my mother, my elder sister and myself We once had a house but it was sold to pay the debts my father left Our relations didn't bother about us, though they lived in the same place They were well-to-do, but after a while my mother branched out on her own, taking a small hut in which we lived It was an outhouse, where the cows used to be kept Then the roof fell down and they replaced it with thatch and the landlord was an old man who knew my mother when she was young and he said he would let us live there free of rent till I could grow up and my sister could marry But food there was none We would eat stale bread which the old man would sometimes send to us and which my mother would soak in a few ounces of milk, and bake on the open oven which was close to my bed Sometimes my mother would earn a little money washing clothes and then she'd buy vegetables and rice and even fish though it was very rare Mary was the old man's grand-niece and she would come to see him sometimes and then she'd play with me My sister was much older but she was not much use A consumptive, she coughed and spat blood day after day My mother would cry as Isobel coughed and spat Sometimes, I

remember my mother going to the market to buy food and I'd wait for her to return, my mouth watering for the stew-hash which I could taste. But she would return empty-handed, telling us she'd offered candles to Mary Magdalen at the Church at the other end of the village and we'd go to bed again with the stale bread soaked in milk. One day Isobel woke up in the middle of the night and coughed and coughed and coughed. She spat blood and more blood, till she brought up lumps of what looked like raw flesh. I sat up in my bed on the floor and watched my mother rub her chest and put cold water on her head, but Isobel didn't stop coughing that night. Then she dropped and my mother gave a piercing cry. I got up and came near to them and felt sick at what I saw. I don't remember much after that, because I think I fainted, but when I did awake again from what felt like a long sleep, I remember seeing Isobel covered up in an old white sheet and my mother kneeling and sobbing beside her. Then for the first time I knew what it was like to be dead, for I hadn't seen my father die. And then they took me away to the landlord's home next morning and I never saw what they did to Isobel."

By now he was talking in almost a whisper. He might just as well have talked to himself. Occasionally, he'd stop to sip the drink as he did now, draining the glass and putting it back only to be filled up again by me. As he had said, he needed the drink to numb the pain.

“ The old man looked after me and my mother worked for him I never quite found out, but I think he was fond of her too and she of him, because she cried when he died and when some years later I asked her how we had got out of Goa, she pointed to a picture she carried with her and I remembered the face of the old man and I knew he had left her his money when he died It must have been quite a lot for I went to school here and then my mother sent me to college She had an obsession in her later days and it was to heal the sick and she'd go out of her way to help the poor Towards the end of her life, she kept dinnning this into me—that I should devote my life to healing and on her death-bed she told me her wish was that I should become a doctor ”

He paused again and sipped and paused and went on “ So I became one And I did quite well in life I worked in a hospital each morning and in the afternoon I attended to my own patients One day there came to my dispensary a poor young woman She was complaining of pain in the head I examined her but could not diagnose her trouble She came again the next day and the medicine I had given her had done her a little good She sat and talked, for it was good to see a countrywoman of mine in the city I asked her where she came from—the town, the village And it came back to the two of us—that we were children once, who had played together as kids That's how I met Mary and I began to look after her After a while I thought it wiser to take her to a

specialist, which I did. There was nothing wrong, he said 'Exposure to the sun.' I still remember the words. He said it in that big way these specialists have about them. But I wasn't sure. Then somehow the pain disappeared and it never troubled her for a long time. We were married quietly. And we began life together. My practice improved and I did well. I handled all sorts of jobs—maternity cases and venereal disease. They were my speciality. There always seem to be venereal disease."

He paused abruptly and said "But Mary never conceived a child. Perhaps it's as well

More and more he sipped his drink. "Eight years ago Mary showed the first signs of mental derangement. The pain in the head had come back again. Her eyes were affected. Medicine by then had improved enough to be able to diagnose it as something more than exposure to the sun. It was a tumour on the brain and I didn't have the nerve to get her operated here. I left my work and devoted my time to her, but gradually it grew worse and worse and she became morose and I knew if I showed her to any more doctors they would certify her as mad. So the last year has passed and I've drugged her on morphia all the time. She sleeps so much but I'm afraid even the morphia can't keep her quiet now. Sometimes she breaks out, as you saw her today and I have to push the needle into her again. But it's no use. I've hardly spoken to her for over a year. I know it's all over now."

“ I shouldn’t say that doctor ”

“ No, I know what I’m talking about But that’s not the tragedy I haven’t told you all She came on a boat from Goa and the captain sold her to a woman who kept a brothel She was sixteen then and got her first taste of men in the most sordid of circumstances The day she came to my dispensary she had more than a headache and I had to see to all that too I cured her in more ways than one I had to Already, before she saw me, they had cut her open once and made a hash of things That’s why she could never bear a child for me ”

And he gulped the rest of his drink and put the glass down on the table with the finality of a man who wanted to say he had had enough And he sat up in the cane chair from his resting position and the light which had fallen on his hands now fell on his face and I could see his dark face in profile, a mouldy, worn-out expression silhouetted against a background of nothingness And I could picture the crisp, coin-like profile he must have had, now slightly smudged with wear, and like a worn-out coin, it had more or less merged into the metal itself And as he turned his face, I saw it again—an ordinary, unimpressive face which I’d never have noticed had I seen it anywhere in the city midst the multitude of faces that all looked alike and unimpressive and tired and worn-out like that of Dr Felix D’Souza

The doctor broke the silence that followed and said “ I must go now The little girl is all alone

watching over Mary and it's getting late "

" Good night, doctor If I can help....."

He looked at me and I stopped It was the sort of sentiment I seldom expressed and I thought, in that moment, of my aloofness, my distance from the rest of the world and my independence which must, I felt, always be inviolate Already there had been Sir Udul and the Khoja lady Yesterday it was Judy and Maxine Very soon it would be the whole of the city that would be knocking at my door, and I knew if I yielded now I would be yielding to them all and it would mean the end of my street in Seville, the end of the grand boulevard that ran below my window, the end of all that beautiful world that lay, in my imagination, at my feet

" You can help," he said, looking away. " You have helped I have seen it in your face The change in you from the days when we used to cross each other on the stairs and nod "

I didn't reply nor commit myself And as he left me to go back to his wife and the little Goan girl who watched over her, I wondered what I was changing to and why

When Dr Felix D'Souza left, I began to feel the strain of the day It was not easy to get sleep after a day so strenuous as that I couldn't even change into my pyjama suit which came from the cotton mill that roared only a few hundred yards away Roaring in the distance, its chimney standing up like a spire in the clearness of a pagan sky. For all divinity had

vanished from the heavens that night and the firmament looked cheap and gaudy studded overmuch with diamond-like stars A nouveau-riche sky, so showy, so cold, so cruel and calculating Rotating—marking time to a destiny that shaped like our lives Out on the terrace I felt small and weak and powerless—a creature living on sufferance at the will of a greater force over which I had no control Even as in my world at the garret with my own creation at my feet I felt like a God Now I got some idea of the feelings of those who must have at some time or other looked up at me from down below and of whom I had taken but little notice For I had never wondered what my matador wanted and whether he was happy, walking on and on day after day at my own sweet will, down on the streets of Seville I had never asked myself whether the little coat and skirt that leant on the lamp-post had fed that cold, wintry December night while I had made her wait and wait and wait for some man to take her home All over the world it was like that and the meek had not yet inherited the earth

Back into my room I went and my eyes fell on the painting on the wall, the one which Mohamed Aziz had never understood How limp she lay, suppliant, prostrate, like all the women of the world who had given of themselves Yes, to me that picture was now more than ever symbolic of womanhood with its self-abnegation, and yet its self-realization And I lay awake for a long while watching this picture on my wall

I spent a restless night alone in bed

Perhaps for the first time I yearned for companionship. The loneliness began to emphasize itself. The absence of Judy was something I became conscious of, as if she had been there every night, clinging on to me as she had done the nights before. Yes, this loneliness frightened me—not physically perhaps as children are frightened of the dark, but mentally, and I looked for something beside me which wasn't there, like a familiar figure at church which knelt beside you each Sunday and now wasn't there. Like a face that had vanished from your sight, when you had been accustomed to see it on the pillow next to you each morning. Yet I had no reason to miss anything because my whole philosophy of living was based on my detachment from the rest of the world and on my being able to stand by myself, aloof and untouched. That power had gone from within me, the power to be myself and alone. Even the familiar swish-swish of the Khoja women would have been enough, if I could have heard it, as I used to on days of the festival, when the dear old lady below me was still alive. The quiet that prevailed was strange to me, even though it was only like any other night. I could hear the clock tick, and hour by hour I could feel the heavy hand as it passed the stroke of twelve. And then I must have dropped off to sleep, for I got up with a start and looked at the watch and it was long past four and I steadied myself, for I had seen a nightmare in which I felt the world closing in on me and all the

people I knew—some dead, some alive—were coming closer and closer to me, cramping me and making it difficult for me to breathe at all

I shook myself up a bit and put on the light and had a long drink Cold water I then went out on the terrace to smoke a cigarette in the cool of the early morning air It was quiet and still, but for the lapping of the water down below, where the outskirts of the garden met the sea and where I had often watched the storm break and lash against the garden of my garret, which I believed was some impregnable island fortress far out in the open sea

I sat and smoked and soon I heard soft voices as if they sang a chant and at first I thought I was only imagining things but later they became louder and more distinct I got up and looked around and below, but nothing could be seen and I stood and listened to those voices that came from the night

But they were more real than I had thought and I got curious and opened the door and went down the stairs and then I knew where they came from, for as I went down the stairs, past the floor where the old Khoja lady used to stay, I saw the door of Dr Felix D'Souza slightly ajar and the lights were on I rushed up to fetch my gown and went down again and knocked at the door but there was no reply The chant went on, louder than before, and I pushed the door a little and put my head in and as it creaked I saw faces turn and look at me and the doctor too and he beckoned to me to come in, putting his finger

to his lips to indicate the need for silence

I went in

They had all gathered round the bed. Some fifteen or twenty of them. Men and girls. Dakhnis from Goa. Olive complexioned girls and dark and awkward men. They were all dressed as if for an occasion—the girls wearing light-coloured sarees, belted at the hips, the men in ill-fitting dark-blue or black seige suits, their hands behind their backs. And on the bed itself was the doctor's wife, more placid in expression than I had last seen her, her grey-white hair swept back over her tiny head, and she was breathing heavily and by her side sat the little Goan girl holding the old lady's hand and still as frightened as before. The doctor was standing over her head, with a funnel attached to a tube from which he gave her oxygen.

How different he looked from the broken-down man I had seen earlier that night, cracking up before me as he sipped those whiskies one by one to numb his pain. Now he stood strong and erect and his body hardly looked emaciated or bent, for his demeanour was upright and like a sentry he stood over his wife.

I stood a little away from this group, watching them chant and though I couldn't follow the words, it was the melody of it that was so haunting. A folk song, I judged from its simplicity and its sweetness. It combined all the grace and the simplicity I had ever known—the sort of femininity which goes in the Orient with sweet-smelling jasmin flowers and a hint of

shoulders as they swayed to the rhythm and a half-suppressed tear that might just as easily have been a smile. And the male chorus stood rock-like behind the girls, repeating the melody like a near echo that was louder than the original sound.

What a strange ritual, I said to myself, that on a death-bed one should hear a folk song. It could have been nothing else. And then it came to me in a flash, as Sir Udul might have said, and I could see some field of corn with the reapers at dusk, bringing in the harvest in some part of the world yet untouched by the barbarity and the vandalism that had become the heritage of a decaying civilization.

I tried hard to hear the words, but they were foreign to me, but one line kept repeating and I followed it closely till I could hear it clearly each time. That must have been the theme of it, I felt—that something-around-which the old lady's life had centered.

Suddenly, the song stopped and an awkward silence followed and the doctor put the glass funnel aside and I could just notice the last gasps of the dying woman and then a stillness followed and one by one the figures that crowded round the bed knelt down and made the sign of the Cross. Only the doctor stood, still upright and immobile and he looked on, his eyes almost popping out of the sockets, but his hands hadn't yet made the sign of the Cross. And the little Goan girl looked frightened at what she saw and she looked at the old man and then the old woman who

lay dead and at those who stood around the bed and felt bewildered and afraid and didn't know what to do.

I stood where I was and looked on Now I could see more clearly the old woman as she lay before me Her head had dropped on her side, and she looked so much smaller than she was, as if in the moment of death she had shrunk

The old man moved round and took her limp hands in his and kissed them and crossed them on her body He closed her open mouth and straightened her head He bent down and kissed her on the forehead and then he moved towards the window on the other side and opened it and the wind came rushing in and the curtains moved inwards and the grey-white hair on the old woman stirred and then stood still for a moment and the wind flew out again, the curtains blowing with it and there was a stillness all over again And the doctor watched it all happen and in the stillness he knelt down, facing the open sky and he made the sign of the Cross and closed the windows gently with his hands and he wept

And the little Goan girl ran to him and caught him round the hips and burst into tears

I paid my respects to the dead in the way I had been accustomed, for there was not much else I could do and I went back upstairs to the garret and stood on the verandah, facing the city that still lay before me

And soon there came the dawn and the first streaks of grey emerged from the black darkness of the night like a film that was changing colour in the

developing room and soon the top of the hill became distinguishable from the sky and the house-tops stood out clearer than before and a new day was born

Yesterday there had been three deaths, was the first thing I said to myself But it had to be, for even as the French said " Jamais deux sans trois "

Nothing happened twice that didn't happen a third time It was written in the book of words

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ONE morning Mohamed Aziz came to collect his rent. He wore *chunidars* and a light heliotrope *sherwani* and a red *fez*. Out of the top pocket of the long coat there stuck out a bright silk handkerchief of scarlet and green.

He was chewing *pan*. He looked particularly cheerful that morning—a cheerfulness which expressed itself in the way he had tilted his cap. There was a broad smile on his face and the juice of betel-nut oozed out on to his lips, and his pearly teeth were covered in red.

He sat down and his eyes almost instinctively fell on the nude that hung on my wall. Somehow he never paid as much attention to the other picture of the kneeling pierrot that knelt beside the half-undressed pierrette. But the nude he watched closely, not flinching from his gaze even once. He was not shy and bashful as before. He didn't get hot under the collar. He didn't steal glances at her as he used to. Now he looked at me, still chewing his betel-nut, as if to say "See, I can look at her now."

"There have been two deaths in this house,"

I said to him

He nodded his head, but was not impressed. He kept staring at the picture on the wall. That touched him more than the deaths of two old women. And old women were always dying, his expression seemed to say.

I gave him the cheque and as he took it, he looked up again at the nude and then at me and asked me how much I would sell it for.

"Name your price," he said to me in Hindustani, for he spoke no English at all, except when he said odd words like "Thank you" or "Much obliged", but I had not heard him say even that for quite a long time. So he spoke the language he knew—the language which was after all his and mine. So when he said "Name your price," he really said something so different in tone, and his way of saying it was so much more courteous than I can convey in an English translation.

"There is no price for it," I replied.

"As you please," he said.

And that was strange because Mohamed Aziz was the type of fellow who was certain everything had a price and there was nothing one couldn't buy if you could pay the price.

"Why," I asked, "do you want it so much?"

"It is like this," he replied, and he spoke in Hindustani of course, "I have seen this picture since the day I first came to you for the rent. I don't usually go round collecting rents myself. But this

gave me an excuse and I used to look forward to coming here, if only to see this picture I used to think of this as something that had been denied to me and the more I looked at it, the more I wanted it for myself Not the picture, mind you But what it implied The whiteness of the woman, her whole expression I could never find that in the women I had known " And he became a little bashful as he said this and his head bent a little to avoid catching my eye Then he shrugged his shoulders and pointed at the picture and continued "There is not only whiteness in that "

" What else is there ? "

" There is something of giving about it, a completeness of satisfaction "

" Your wives ? You have two of them What do you want from other women ? "

" That is the trouble Perhaps I could have got more from one, I sometimes feel The more I looked for satisfaction in women the less I have got "

" I don't believe that," I taunted him

" When I saw that picture I knew what satisfaction was I had never seen a woman wear that expression on her face There has been passion on the faces of some of them There has been lust But always they had laughed and I sometimes wondered whether they were laughing at me "

This was a little too much from Mohamed Aziz. His manner of speaking was slightly crude I felt and yet it wasn't, when you bore in mind that he was

aware of his crudeness So Mohamed Aziz was almost charming that morning as he spoke of the things he had done and had yet to do

“ Some days ago,” he said after a little pause, “ I was walking home when I saw a woman look at me I park my car away from the house and I walk a little way to my home She was a youngish woman of the North India type She was poor and her clothes were not very good She was sitting by the water-tap where the servants usually come to wash their clothes It belonged to the building three blocks away from where I stay I noticed her for the first time that day, though now I am sure I had seen her before That day when she looked at me I looked at her too, but she didn’t turn her eyes away And as I went past, I felt there was something strange about her No woman of that class had dared to look at me in the face I couldn’t look back because it would be undignified, but I wanted her that day She was not pretty, but as she sat there, I could see she had a fine body There was something about her that made me bite my lower lip I went home that evening and quietly went to bed I passed by the same way the next day and she was there again and she looked at me the same way and I at her and I felt more strange and restless when I got home But I didn’t dare to go down and speak to her She was probably the wife of some *chowkidar* or a servant and how would it look for me? On the third evening it happened all over again Only it was a little later

that evening and I couldn't see her as clearly I smiled as I came nearer but she didn't smile back I felt small, but something inside of me made me pause and I stopped in front of her She didn't move There was no one around and I came a few steps nearer to her Still she didn't move She just kept looking at me She had a very clean type of face and there was a look of lonesomeness in her eyes And then I suddenly thought of the picture on your wall and I became big again in my own estimation And I felt kinder towards her—different from my first feeling for her, which was of the body So I smiled at her and something must have been written all over my face, because she smiled back And forgetting all fear of being seen with such a poor class woman, I asked her if she'd come with me and she thought for a moment and got up without saying a word That was a strange experience for me and I was a little confused I started walking ahead and began to perspire because I was walking quickly, afraid of being seen I walked without looking round till I came to my house and to my rooms and then I let her in ”

He was becoming a little self-conscious now, but I didn't interrupt him

He went on “ She was cleaner than I thought and her body was full of muscle ”

Mohamed Aziz clenched both his fists and bit his lip again

“ Muscle,” he repeated “ And then something

unusual happened to me and I experienced a new feeling and a vision came before my eyes It wasn't her really, because I don't think I looked much at her face, but I thought of all the women I had seen and had and she seemed to give me what I had never got from them I made love to her twice that night and twice I saw her as in this picture and I felt that at last I had understood its meaning Then she got up and dressed and made a gracious *namaskar* as one does when retiring from the presence of a great man and went away I gave her nothing, for it entirely escaped my mind Nor did she wait or ask She went away leaving me confused but with a feeling I had achieved something I looked for her the next day and the day after at the spot near the tap, for I wanted to give her something to remember me by Perhaps I wanted her again," Mohamed Aziz shyly confessed, "but she was not to be found Weeks have passed since that day and I have never seen her again So I thought, maybe I'd ask you if you'd like to sell me this picture, because I want it very much now"

I was surprised but that was to put it a little mildly.

"The dog," I said to myself, "the gay old dog"

But I meant it nicely I forgot for a few moments that he was waiting for my answer But he didn't make his request again He merely said "The whiteness was in her too But under the skin A whiteness invisible to the naked eye, but which is

there if you can find it "

I got up and went to the wall and looked at my picture again

My mind went back to a night in the rive Montparnasse when I sat in a small café, next to the famous Dome. It must have been almost eleven that night I think the year was 1933 and I was turning over the pages of Paris Soir, reading about the coming into power of a new party in Germany and of a man called Adolf Hitler whose picture I saw for the first time that night. There was a look of determination on this man's face, which was frightening even though at that moment I remember dismissing it as melodramatic. I was sitting alone and was sipping coffee and cognac, waiting for the odd hour to pass when the night-life of that city used to begin. Then I laid my paper down and watched the constant stream of passers-by, listened to the patter of patent-leather shoes, the chatter of conversation trickling from those who sat in the café around me, the syncopation of clanking horns, the gendarme's whistle and the roar of the traffic as it passed by. And then someone near me, a young man whom I hadn't noticed, asked me for a match and I gave him one, to find he had taken it only to light a broken stump. I dipped into my pocket for my case and offered him a cigarette, which he gratefully took and put in his pocket and continued to smoke the stump. A little later the waiter came and made up his bill. The young man had only two large sandwiches of ham and crisp

bread and two coffees and now he couldn't pay that small bill of less than five francs. He asked quietly and dignifiedly for the manager, who was in turn equally graceful for it was Paris, remember that, and I gathered that the young man next to me wanted to leave a picture behind as a deposit till he could come and pay his bill some day.

Or there may have been even a suggestion of a sale. I don't really know.

That was the same picture I was looking at now and I had paid just one hundred francs for it. No one knew the artist and even I could never quite decipher his scrawl. We had come a long way together as Dr. Felix D'Souza had said of his wife, this picture and I, and I felt sad at the thought of parting with it. But when I saw the look on Mohamed Aziz's face and the anguished suspense while I hesitated those few minutes, I couldn't resist picking it up from the wall and giving it to him.

It was slightly dusty but I blew the dust away. And I said to Mohamed Aziz. "You can take it," for I knew that if I didn't say it then, I wouldn't say it at all.

"For nothing?" he said, so surprised.

And I shrugged my shoulders even as the manager of that little bistro in the *rue Montparnasse* had done, when the blond young man left the *café* without turning round.

And Mohamed Aziz's smile broadened and the juice of *pan* trickled from the side and he swallowed

a large quantity of accumulated spit and said in his awkward little way " Much obliged "

And he sprang up and adjusted his fez and in a moment he was gone

He disappeared so soon, I noticed he had left the rent-cheque behind

He has never come back again

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THESE were perhaps minor details when greater events blasted and swung and rocked this fast-moving world. But while to some like Sir Udul—or now more correctly the late Sir Udul Boice—it was the war that stood out above everything else, to me this war, disastrous as it was, was merely the background against which there appeared little events with which were connected little figures like Judy and Johnnie, and Dr Felix D'Souza and Mohamed Aziz and Beh and Suni and the others. But for them, I knew I would have been cloistered in my garret, living in my world of make-believe—in an era of peace and dignity, so different to the era in which we really lived. Peace and dignity and greatness in that classical sense were absent from our existence. Greatness there was in the sense of a primeval vastness and power, a brute force devoid of culture, religion or grace. A Frankensteinian greatness Marlowesque and frightening. A greatness of the type of which revolutions are made, bathed in blood and baptised by fire. A bastard greatness really.

In rough chronology one would mention the

assault on Russia, the playback in the Middle East, and the eruption in the Far East and Singapore, now endangered the good earth was like a kidney tray in which lay cold, smelly and decomposed, the blood of all nations

Such was the background on a small piece of which I wanted to paint the picture of my life. No artist could dare to paint the whole of the background or tackle so vast a canvas

I had always been a small-town painter. A sort of pen and ink portrait painter who was happy if he could get even a faint resemblance to the subject. A similarity of form, a closeness of expression, a suggestion of character—if I could get any of these or capture even a moment of someone's life, it thrilled me to the core—like stealing in an unguarded moment a glimpse of a page in the life of someone who has tried to remain a closed book, or like being present accidentally when on an impulse a woman betrays an emotion, which she tries later to keep choked down. These moments are incomparable to anything else you can ever feel and that experience, fleeting, momentary and spasmodic though it be, is yours and yours alone and neither time nor space can ever take back from you that thrill, nor should you ever try to decipher the inscrutable workings of fate

But all this is by the way, though it may tell you something about the one character in this book which is most difficult to portray—myself. It may also help to bridge that space of time which elapsed

between the early happenings and those that came later to complete this story For it is not possible to write about details in the lives of people for fear of missing the more important moments of those lives It is as if you were on a slow passenger train that stops at every little station and you felt anxious lest through boredom or fatigue you should fall asleep and miss the big junction at which you should have been awake

So it doesn't really matter if I omit the details of the funeral of Mrs Felix D'Souza or to say how that small gathering of unknown people wept by her grave Or how, shrouded in white Sir Udal was borne on his simple bier to the Tower where he was to find his eternal silence Or even how in the days that passed, I dipped more frequently into the city, seeing sometimes Beh and Suni in their house on the top of the Hill and admiring from a distance that richness of life they had found through each other Or how I would go to see Maxine in his gaudy little room with the rainbow-coloured silk curtains and green upholstery and pink-enamelled furniture, and watch him struggle and fret for that Castle-on-the-Hudson way down in Bangalore Or the days I spent with Judy and with Johnnie And Johnnie's childish prattle of going to strange lands to which I had never been and to which Johnnie was probably never destined to go

China and Mexico ! China and Mexico ! Always China and Mexico !

Or when alone with Judy Or again and again

the consummation of the same flaming moment, and the sane stillness that would inevitably follow and how I'd think that one particular moment was the most important till another more important moment would arrive and brush the other aside

Out of those many months a few details stood out more clearly than the others They were trifling really, but they had some bearing on her life and possibly mine Like commas they punctuated the sentence and gave it rhythm and an easy flow and some direction as to how the sentence should be read and even constructed So they were important because a misplaced comma can often change the whole meaning of a sentence

One of these little details was the little gold cross I gave to Judy, with a thin gold chain which she wore round her neck There was a faint inscription on the Cross which was my own idea and it read "1900" It was inscribed vertically on the long bar, leaving the short, horizontal piece still uninscribed I gave the cross to Judy long after she had first spoken about it, because it gave her time to live that new religion she said she had found, and I wanted to be sure she had understood its meaning

The other detail was even less important, but I was more conscious of it and of its significance It was a picture of Judy—just a head made up of a face with a nose and eyes and her long jet-black hair. This picture hung on the wall made bare by the nude which Mohamed Aziz had taken away from me Some-

times as I lay in bed and looked at it, I could first see the picture as it was and there would be a lap-dissolve, as they say in the language of the film world and then I'd see the nude as it used to hang and then the two would merge, superimposed—like a montage

And then I knew what I really meant to see, for Judy had taken the part of the girl in the first picture Or perhaps the oil on the canvas had sprung to life and the unknown figure had now a name and a shape and a form and a meaning

For what was the use of a picture unless it meant something to you?

If, in the background of the story of the lives of these little people was the great unwritten and incomplete story of a world war, in the background of those emotions which they felt was also the changing weather, as much a feature of this country as its customs, its superstitions, its quaint rituals. But in the garret I knew no rain no heat, no dust, no slimy, sticky moistness I was only conscious of the one phase of the weather and it was during the monsoon, when it poured for days on end and a curtain of water stood between the city and me, making the garret even more like a world entire in itself.

I would hardly have noticed those sticky and wet rainy days, were it not that I had constantly to penetrate that dampness in order to get into the other world of the city—the city into which, because of Judy, my incursions were becoming more and more frequent Each time I went to it I felt like a bandit

that had come out of hiding to visit those places to which he did not belong

The city was like that to me—a place where I felt like a stranger. But I went to it all the same and brought back something for myself on every visit. But now I was getting afraid that one day it would come to the garret to get me. And I could never make up my mind which meant more to me—my distant aloofness and that entity which was myself or that hollow aching which I felt for Judy?

The conflict became greater as the days rolled on. It would have been easier if I could have lifted Judy out of the city and transplanted her into the garret and made her also part of the world which I had built for myself—with that cobbled street in Seville running below my window and the buses of London roaring past and the clank of Paris taxi-horns and all that which was of my own phantasy and of my own creation.

But to lift her and transplant her was not so easy. She had roots in the city and branches had sprung from her and with the strength of those same roots, a little flower had blossomed and to transplant one was to transplant the whole tree and if in the process of transplantation the little flower, that was Johnnie, was injured, I was so afraid it might kill the whole tree, leaving me only with the dead roots.

And so I didn't dare

I went on and on, backward and forward, into the city and back to the garret, waiting for some light to fall on the writing on the wall.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ONE day, all of a sudden, we realized that the war had suddenly come nearer. For many days before that, sub-editors of local newspapers had played about with the headlines, always round the words "Zero Hour." Like the sword of Damocles it hung above us, but it never seemed to fall. The equivalents of the word "imminent" were exhausted. Everything had happened, except that which we were waiting for—the outbreak in the Far East, and that we felt would never come. The clock had come to zero hour, but instead of striking, it lazily stood still.

"The Japs are probably saying farewell to their Geishas," I once told Judy and she thought it was decent of them to have so much feeling. That was the only thing I missed in Judy—that appreciation of the subtler side of life. Her love for me was too great to be doubted, but often in her enthusiasm not to disappoint me, she became almost bovine in her attachment. Sometimes she made me wonder what bound us two together. "Was it the body?" I had asked myself. Was it that I found in her an outlet

for my "self", for I had lived too much in the garret, too cooped up to be a normal human being I waivered between an intensive conceit and a self-reliance which was really only a form of modesty I couldn't quite make out, but Judy gave me the chance of feeling big within myself, big with the rest of the world, big with Judy From her there was no opposition and here in the garret I felt like a king, who obeyed only one law "The King can do no wrong"

How foolish it all seems now!

Then zero hour struck at last and all over the city there was a rude awakening We had looked forward to it so long and now that it had happened, we were amazed it had happened at all

I watched the news carefully for those few days I watched the faces of people fall as those puny Japs in the first blush and enthusiasm of war sank some of the mightier ships that had ever sailed the seven seas The climax of the tragedy was reached when the *Prince of Wales* went down to its watery grave—once the pride of the Allied fleet, now just an ugly hulk which had lost its form, its shape, its shine The news of these early sinkings almost hit you in the face and you stood dazed, wondering what there was in store for you on the morrow

But I still refused to be touched It was bad enough to have had my aloofness tampered with by little events and little people But if I were to allow myself to be caught by the tide of greater events I knew that sooner or later I would be just a little raft

floating on the bosom of a tempestuous sea

One evening during the early days of the eruption in the Far East, I sat too long on the terrace and forgot that I had promised to pick up Judy from Maxine's at the end of his early practice class. I dashed along the drive in the black two-seater and when I got to Maxine's I found his place was closed and Judy wasn't even waiting outside. I tried the Little House in Nestle Lane but only Johnnie was at home playing in his pyjamas with the old servant woman. No one knew where Judy was that night. Nor did she come to the garret. That was the only time we had missed an appointment and it struck me as strange because I had always thought that Judy was the type of girl who would never be impatient of waiting.

There was also one morning when Judy unexpectedly came to the garret and found me out and the Pir told me she had waited for over an hour and he mentioned something about her reading papers while she waited, but I hadn't paid any attention to that either, for when I asked Judy about it the next day she had laughed a little and I said nothing more

Two weeks passed and one morning I had an urgent call from Suni. She sent a note with her driver asking me to go to the house at once. I changed quickly and went to see her. When I arrived she ~~attachm~~ ^{met} me upstairs in Beh's room. She was packing ~~sent for~~ ^{two} ~~two~~ was pale and her eyes were red. ~~for him~~ Was it that ~~she~~ was dishevelled. Her clothes with crying. ~~Her~~ ^{she} has ~~216~~ and always been a perfect

example of grace and poise and equilibrium, something that remained beautifully unruffled no matter what happened. At times I had even suspected her of being aloof and cold-blooded. But that I knew she wasn't.

"Where are you going? What's the matter?", I asked, seeing her distraught. "What's the matter with you, Suni?" I repeated.

For a moment she couldn't speak and then I thought she gulped something, but I think it was just the lump in her throat. She pulled herself together and in that moment I could see how environment and background and breeding counted in life and how the principles of living that are taught to you from your childhood by your parents came to your rescue in moments like these, in which character was moulded and stood its severest test.

"I'm not going anywhere," she answered, almost in a matter of fact sort of way, as if nothing at all was the matter with her, and then she smiled as she would out of courtesy at a stranger that had come to visit their house. Then the expression on her face changed, and more seriously, looking down and away from me, she said "It's Beh. He has decided to go away."

"To go away?" I stuttered. "Why?"

"What am I saying! I am off my mind really" and she put her hand to her head and ran her fingers through her hair, which were more grey than I had ever seen them, as if they had become like that overnight.

I waited for her to speak and she said " No, no I mean he is joining up But to me it's just the same He is going away "

" I really don't know what you are talking about Suni you must pull yourself together and speak a little coherently It doesn't make sense to me "

She looked hurt but it woke her up a bit and she continued in a more placid frame of mind " He has decided to put his experience of aviation at the disposal of the Air Force and volunteered for active service "

" But he's fifty-two," I said " How can he go on active service ? I don't think they'll let him fly at that age "

" I don't think so too , but he's made up his mind Since Boice died, Beh has never been the same It even affected his relationship with me as if the ghost of the old man stood between us Not ostensibly, mind you But something inside of him is dead and he won't unburden himself of his grief even to me He is very gentle and sweet as he has always been, but I know it, for if I don't, who would ? Gradually it has eaten into him It has grown like a cancer and now I think it has burst As you know, and I suppose you are the only one who does, Beh would give his life for Duli and me Yes I suppose that's what he wants to do now "

And she couldn't speak any more and that lump in her throat came up again and the water in her eyes, and her lips quivered and then she gasped and said

" Tell me what shall I do ? "

I moved a little towards her, close enough for her to be able to put her head on my shoulder and give vent to her pent-up emotion, for she cried and gasped, while I struggled to find some answer for her staggering question

" I must see him before I can say anything," I said, " For I am confused myself I don't understand it He can do so much here. The whole of Buda's is vital for defence and he couldn't leave it now How can he ? "

But by now I wasn't sure whether I was talking to Suni or thinking loudly myself I tried to think hard what I should say that would comfort her, but then I realized that it was best that she should have her cry I made her sit down on a chair and gave her a handkerchief with which to blow her nose, and her gasps became shorter and less frequent but as spontaneous and even more *staccato* I paced the room a little and became restless myself, hoping that in the hushed silence that followed, something would occur to me and my ears pricked up at the sound of the patter of little feet and then a girlish voice piped down the corridor and as it came closer I could recognize it was little Duli, Suni's kid and Beh's kid, that little monument of their love they had built together, very late in life, for Duli was only six years then

Suni's eyes bristled out of their sockets An aching tension came over her and as the kid came into the room playfully shouting "Mummy," Suni rushed

up to her, lifted her from the ground and crushed her in embracement

"Baby," she whispered into the child's ear, "My Baby" And I kept pacing up and down the room still not knowing what to say I waited for a few moments and then ventured "I think I'll see Beh at the office It will be better that way"

Suni did not reply, I don't even know if she heard me speak or whether she knew I was still there, for her world was in her arms and her thought and mind was full of it to want to listen to anything I said I said it all over again This time she replied, mournfully "All right If you think it's better that way"

And the little child looked perplexed at seeing her mother cry, lifted up Suni's chin and asked "Why are you crying, mummy?" And the little child didn't wait for an answer for she smiled at me and gave it herself "The boogy-man is making her cry"

And Suni smiled even from her gasping cry

"Don't be silly, Baby," she said

And I quietly left the room

I breathed a sigh of relief as I left that house and drove away in the black two-seater, for I never remembered going out of Beh's house so stunned as I was then Even the night of that house-warming party when I took Judy away, I was untouched myself, still the bastion of imperturbability, which was my strength and my only prop Now I seemed to have lost all that and to have become just like any other

person, susceptible to joys and sorrows, and changing with them. And I wasn't quite sure whether I was the richer or the poorer for that change.

I drove in a daze, through the streets that I knew so well, the streets of the city which were now more familiar to me, streets in which little people lived, and where I now realized there were little joys and little sorrows of which I had never heard nor thought and where there was poverty and squalor and riches and unhappiness and over which passed a constant stream of human beings whom I had never seen and whom I would never know. There was a monotony of sameness in their faces, if I looked at them as I had always looked upon people from the precincts of my garden, but if I looked at them differently, with kindness in my eyes, there was also a beautiful oneness in those same faces and it made me wonder if it was really true that God had reflected His image in man.

The asphalt, the concrete, the drab cement moved under me and there was a mild consciousness of covering space but more than that I did not know, for I was driving blankly through it all, heading to meet a friend who was leaving for an unknown destination, probably never to return.

I regained a sort of consciousness as I went into Beh's room and felt the chilly atmosphere created by his air-conditioning plant. The abrupt contrast had shaken me and I was getting allergic to sharp contrasts and to changes of climate and mood and fortune. In a way it was a bad sign, for

I realized more and more that my little fortress of imperturbability had lost the power of being entire in itself

“ So you heard,” Beh said, almost coldly

“ Heard what ? ” I asked

“ Go on,” he said, “ it’s written all over your face ”

“ You don’t have to be so aggressive about it
After all I haven’t said a word yet ”

“ Yet ! That’s the important word, isn’t it ”

Then he leant back in his chair and rocked and smiled and said “ Spout the words, if you must But let’s get it over soon and be done with it, because nothing you say will make me change my mind ”

“ I’ve got nothing to say,” I replied, and Beh looked a little surprised, but I knew him so long that if I had any chance against him that day it was to make him believe that his decision didn’t matter

And all of a sudden his mood changed and he came forward and leant on the table and fondled for a moment a paper-weight and said in a strange and distant sort of way “ I’m surprised at the way you can stand away from it all ”

I looked at Beh severely

It was the first time we had looked at each other estranged like that I remembered how only a little while ago I had seen his wife and child and how selfish I deemed he was, when I thought in terms of their happiness and their future, merely to satisfy what I knew could only be an impulse But even so, out of respect for him and remembering always, as I had done, the diffe-

rence in age that was between us, I had smothered my words and put on that placidity of countenance for which I was now being criticized by him. And that was a little too much for me and for a few moments I don't think I cared what happened to our friendship or cared about the difference in years between us or cared about anything except myself. For this war was a sore point with me for many reasons which I had never disclosed to any one and which I was even trying to forget myself. But Beh's words went straight to that spot where I was always most vulnerable and they hurt, and I could feel within me that piece of lead move as it had sometimes done—that dead weight which I carried with me and which belonged to a part of my life which was dead.

"You needn't look at me. Say something," Beh said.

"Don't you think it would be better if we left things unsaid and waited till you came back to clear up what may stand between us now?"

"I don't know anything that stands between us," Beh replied, astonished.

"If you claim for yourself the right to live your own life, even though your life is really not your own, for with you there are other people like Suni and your child and this whole edifice which you inherited with all its responsibilities, surely I, who have no obligation at all, and no responsibility, and on whom nobody really depends, have the right to make and keep to myself my decisions at a time like this?"

"I didn't say anything," Beh replied, and I could see we were getting colder and colder towards each other, "I simply said I was surprised that you could live aloof and apart from the rest of the world and could refuse to be drawn into the crucible of human sorrow. That's all I said. And I still say I am surprised."

"But that's the principle of my life, Beh. It's my entire living. What difference does it make whether one human being or a hundred thousand are crying out for my help? I have spent my life to build up this fortress around me—a fortress I once swore no man, no woman would ever touch. I have slacked a little and let little people come into my life, but it was only so long as I could check with certainty the encroachment upon myself, whenever I thought that it was becoming unduly dangerous to my entirety. But to step into the crucible of human sorrow, as you put it, would be to deny myself the fundamental principle of my living and to commit suicide in terms of that living. And you wouldn't expect me to do that, knowing me as you do?"

"But why? Why have you this dislike of moving among your fellowmen and being part of that spark which is human life? Why do you want to go through life untouched? There must be some reason. I have always thought and felt there was some reason. Or are you really made just like that?"

"What do you think? You have known me long enough."

"I really don't know. All these years I have known you, I have been content to know you as you are and to take you as you are without ever desiring to probe into your inner self. But that's because we have never clashed in the things that matter in life. Now we have come to a stage where we think differently of the very purpose of living and so I want to know what is behind all this aloofness that's so typical of you."

I gazed intently at the little paper-weights that were lined neatly on his table. I remarked to myself how prim and proper and orderly they were and how there was a natural and logical succession in the way they stood, one behind the other, exactly where you expected them, so that even if you came into the room in utter darkness you could lay your hands on them one by one. And I pictured them again in disorder and how you would have to grope for them and stumble over them to lay hands on them in the dark. And I thought of my life in those terms and of the darkness that was crowding around me, deepening with each word that Beh said. I began to grope and wonder myself on what detail I could hit which would be a sort of landmark from the past and where I could begin that story which I had never even bothered to tell myself—the story of a young and impressionable man who left twelve years ago in search of life and experience and that something vague which masquerades under the name of education and which you are supposed to get only from fossilized

Dons at universities and from moth-eaten books and in lecture rooms where you would have preferred to have fallen asleep And I remembered that first crossing of the waters which had impressed upon me that my going away was in the nature of a transition, a sort of metamorphosis from adolescence to manhood And then suddenly my fingers fell in the dark on one of the paper weights and I felt and recognized which one it was and then it came back to me and my hand felt near my heart for that strange throbbing, which is the evidence of life, and quite close to it that leaden pain which had been numbed if only temporarily, but which like an old and unhealed sore had got fresh and troublesome again And then I felt cold and bitter towards Beh, for he was a symbol of the rest of the world, a symbol of everything that was not myself, a symbol of all that from which I had tried to escape And in that cold bitterness which I felt at that moment I blurted out a few words which I now regret, for it was a secret which I shared with myself and the secret is not with me alone

“ I never told you I was married once,” I said to Beh, and he recoiled like a cheap rifle when a shot is fired

I didn’t expect him to say a word Nor did he And I went on “ When I come to think of it, I fought in this war long before it broke out in the form you know it, long before they made proclamations to announce its outbreak and long before persons like

you made decisions to answer the call of humanity. You think today that you are a champion of democracy and of the down-trodden oppressed people who are fighting the Nazi war machine. You feel like a Crusader in a war in which civilization and humanity are crying to you for help. You believe too that it's the British and the French and the Americans who are withstanding the Nazi invasion. You never stop to think that there were others before you in that fight for freedom, that fight against oppression, that fight for the liberation of humanity. All of a sudden you have begun to think of the Chinese and the Russians as your kith and kin kindred democracies that are on your side against the Axis powers. But China was in the battle long before you, years before Britain or America ever thought of the Japanese as a potential danger to the ideals for which you pretend to stand. Russia too, except for one lapse, which may not be a lapse at all, was longer in the field against Fascism and the principles of what the Nazis called National Socialist Democracy. You have been responsible for incredible paradoxes such as when you sent shiploads of materials endlessly across the oceans to replenish the enemy's ability to kill the very people who, you all of a sudden realize, represent the true democracy. You have been as much responsible for the killing and the maiming of decent human beings, of orphaning their children and of reducing their homes and their hospitals and their schools and libraries to rubble and ashes. When this

war is over, Beh, the real glory will be stolen by those who have come later in the field ”

“ But does that mean,” Beh interrupted, “you expect those like me who have realized our duty later not to fight at all ? ”

“ Don’t interrupt me,” I abruptly retorted “ Since you want to know what’s behind this veneer of mine, you might as well have a good look once and for all ”

“ But why are you so bitter about it ? ” Beh said, and his tone was apologetic

“ No, Beh, it’s not bitterness towards any one in particular that I feel, but just a general bitterness which I’ve tried to keep locked up in my heart That is perhaps the reason why I seek refuge in myself, and in cloistered garrets and in being alone and aloof. I’m always afraid of its breaking out of me like sores that follow some horrid disease And I never wanted anyone to see that happen ”

“ Disease ? What disease have you got ? ” Beh asked anxiously

“ Oh ! I don’t mean it like that But I’ve got a piece of lead in me which always stands in the balance between me and the morrow ”

“ Lead ? What lead ? ”

“ A bullet, Beh, an ordinary bullet ”

“ But why ? ”

“ What do you mean, ‘Why’ ? I’ve got it, that’s all I was shot through once and it’s never come out It’s between the heart and the lung It’s been like that

for over six years but one day it will take it into its head to move and then there is nothing I can do."

" But why was it not taken out ? "

" Because taking it out is as dangerous as leaving it in They've all seen it—the great surgeons of Harley Street "

" What did they say ? "

" Their advice was like that which you sometimes get on a baccarat shoe—*voluntarie* So I've preferred to leave it as it is and now I've got almost attached to it It's part of me now, like a lung or a heart—something I'd feel wanting if it was removed "

" But how did it ever happen ? "

" That's what I'm trying to tell you It happened also in a war—in the great undeclared war in which I fought, long before you modern heroes stepped in to take your bow That was as much a real war as this one is There was as much sorrow in those days as there is now As much mutilation and maiming Maybe it did not manifest itself physically as much as it has now But there were hundreds and thousands of persons fleeing from the terror, which now faces you on the battlefield You speak of the Nazi machine as if it was only made of tanks and guns and bombers, but that is not all there is to fight It is not just to prove the superiority of one kind of tank over another that man is fighting man It is for fundamental conceptions of living, conceptions of the functions of the individual and the state, conceptions of morals, ideals, that's what they are fighting for

And one thing more—race superiority That is the keynote of the Nazi conception of life and I encountered it much earlier than you ever did, Beh

Beh didn't interrupt me in the short pause I took to catch my breath for I was in the habit of panting when I got worked up about anything and when words didn't come out of me as quickly as I wanted them to

"In my case," I continued, "it came in the shape of a girl who dropped in front of me in the corridor of my hotel in London. She was hardly ten yards away, heading towards me, when she collapsed like a bird that had been shot. She fell face downwards, but I think her hands broke her fall. I can still picture her as she lay flat on her face, her handbag a few feet away, from which rolled away a round vanity box and a couple of shillings. I rang for the lift attendant, had her picked up and as no one in the hotel knew her, I had her taken to my room, till she revived. It was late at night and I was stepping out to keep a date I had made with a girl in a night-club. The hall-porter who had come up quietly indicated that I should keep quiet about it and when I suggested a doctor, he shook his head. When she recovered, her first words were 'Am I dead?' and she felt for her heart and then she was white under the gills. There was hardly a drop of blood in her cheeks. She looked blankly round the few faces she saw, past me, past the liftman and the valet who had come up to help and then she caught sight of the old hall-porter and she looked intently at him for a while and then

she got frightened till he said 'It will be all right, Miss Shelley' And she looked at him and sighed, saying 'No, Charles I tried so hard' She turned her head on the pillow on my bed and she showed she wanted to sleep The hall-porter asked the others to leave and when we were alone, he asked me if I minded this young lady in the room 'She is a sad case,' he added, 'I've known her since she first came to England and took a room in the hotel Not a shilling on her and with a gesture she asked me to pay the taxis and booked a room She had six large wardrobe trunks in two taxis and she looked like a little heiress stepping out of the cab Her real name is Schwartz Elli Schwartz German passport She's half Jewish and Polish Christian on her mother's side Two weeks before that the London Police had been told by the German Embassy that her passport was forged and the trouble began and she had been hiding ever since She came to me, because I'd known her story We hall-porters always get to know things She was always very kind and generous to me She was even more beautiful than she is now and of course the men flocked to know her But she was always afraid of the persons she met and she would ask me about any one she had a date with The Gestapo were after her I knew once a German spy that came here looking for her but I made him lose his scent Her father was one of the great enemies of Hitler—a rich German Jew, who had the ear of Hindenberg and Brunning and who kept Hitler away for many years and for

that the Nazis thirsted for revenge They wanted to get this girl into Germany, and so they went out of their way to tell the authorities about the forged passport Tonight she came and asked for the room she first occupied in the hotel I know she hasn't got enough on her to pay for it, but then what could I do ? It's 534 at the end of the passage and she was going to it when she dropped in the corridor I'd have got into trouble if you hadn't brought her in here Perhaps it was in her fate you crossed her in the passage ” ”

“ Well, Beh,” I went on, “that's how it started and a week later I married her—of my own accord I don't think I was in love then or that I wanted her body, for she was frail and weak and she needed looking after I don't think she had anything to give and I had so much I didn't want I had nationality I had a vacant place beside me and she had nothing at all No home, no money No country I was her last port of call She came to me, washed up by the storm that raged against the Jews and by the persecution which is now the very thing you want to fight against ” ”

“ But the lead—how does that come in ? ” ”

“ It followed When she became my wife, she got immunity from persecution and the protection of the law Gradually I became very fond of this girl, for she had talent and charm and character and she was very beautiful She expressed herself so well She had breeding She was so cultured, so polished, so refined

I think she liked me too, but I preferred to think she was only grateful I never tried to find out, nor did I have time For in the eleven months I knew her, my one ambition was to give her everything I could which would make her stand on her own without me I didn't want to be just the crutches of an invalid, for I knew some day she would have to do without me I had no place in her life except that I supplied her with a passport She told me more than once it wasn't so, but I thought it was Then one night I awoke frightened in a dream and found she wasn't there I always used to sleep with a revolver under my pillow and somehow my hand went for it and I found it gone I tried to get out of bed and my hand was about to switch on the light, when something must have happened because I suddenly felt numb and I didn't remember anything more It was morning when I found myself in a pool of blood My bed was soaking with blood and I could feel a heavy pain near my heart And I found my own revolver in my hand and for a moment I didn't know how I had shot myself Even now I could never swear what happened I sent for Charles, the Hall-porter of the old hotel, for I was living in a flat now and he got me my doctor, and I told him that I had had an accident and though he didn't believe me, he kept quiet, suspecting an attempted suicide The wound healed and no one knew anything about it I went to Paris and had myself examined when they found the bullet embedded between the left lung and

the heart I waited for many weeks before I crossed back and saw the surgeons in London, who said much the same So it has remained there ever since ”

“ But I don’t understand Why did she have to kill you ? ”

“ She didn’t, even though I thought it was her at first They got her too that night She was chloroformed and removed by the men, who fought on the other side in that undeclared war Her body was found in the river and she could not be correctly identified But I knew it was her because of the wedding ring she wore and which I saw amongst the exhibits in the coroner’s court But I preferred to keep silent, for I knew I could never get her back I knew there was nothing the law could do which would have satisfied me Besides I had my father, who was all I had then, and he was old-fashioned, and there would have been a scandal when the news reached this city and he didn’t even know of my secret marriage Nobody knows it in fact—except you now. But I had lost the first round of that battle and waited my turn to do something for those others who were, like Elli, persecuted by the Brown terror Then father died and I succeeded to his vast estates He left me a great deal more than anybody imagined He had property in Shanghai, in Buenos Ayres, and in other outlandish parts of the world You knew him slightly, didn’t you ? ”

“ I did, but I never imagined him as very wealthy ”

“ No, he never gave that impression, but when

I had sold every piece of land I owned and paid the duties and taxes, I found I had been left a little under a million pounds I kept enough for myself from the income of which I could live as I am living now, but the bulk of it I decided to give away I went to an old Franciscan friar whom I knew when I was a student in England He lived in a little village on the outskirts of the Midlands. He was a man of God and I had met him once in a train coming to London and I had seen him every six months since that meeting and learnt so much from him of the theory of living He worked among people of the Black North—more of an ascetic than a missionary He didn't have so much intelligence nor was his mind analytic, but he had an uncanny intuition about rights and wrongs He was as true to the ideal of the order as St Francis himself was He worked in secret and I must say I once suspected that he was a sort of agent himself He had said something about sending help to the people of Spain and one day he had brought with him a large quantity of gold sovereigns and he asked me to go with him to the East End which I did and saw him give it to the captain of a boat in a horrid little pub called the *Dragon's Tail*, and I gathered from the conversation that he had paid for a shipload of food, which was trying to break through the blockade to reach a port in Spain, where the people were being starved out As he left that pub, I ventured to ask Father Dominic—that was his name—where all that money came from and

he said 'My son, I do not know and if I did, I could not tell It is enough that it is given by a good man for a good cause' And I felt stunned by the rebuff I have never forgotten that So I took my money to him and told him I wanted to give it to those who were being persecuted by the new Germany and that I wanted it also to be used to avenge Elli's death That vast fortune I left with him and he has administered it all these years and never written a word about it to me He never writes But he sent me a message a little while after the war broke out through a Jewish refugee who was bound for the Far East and I learnt from him that over five hundred Jews were found a nationality by him, whether by fair means or not I do not know, and that he had used a part of it to send into Germany itself and it had resulted in the blowing up of a munitions factory in Hamburg and some of it had gone to Jewish settlements in Palestine and some of it to buy tickets and passports for Jews to crossover into America, and then I was told that, now that war had been declared, he intended giving the rest of it to the humanitarian cause of healing the sick and the wounded I heard that he was feeling too old to work on at the same pace as he had done, but he would not die with the bulk of my trust still unadministered And that when he had done his work and every penny of mine had been given away as I had wanted, he would send me a post-card unsigned and I'd know that he had kept his word Beh, I got that card That day I went

into the city and found Judy. Perhaps one led to the other. I don't know. But I feel I've done something for humanity in this way and that I've given all that I had to give. People don't know why I'm poorly off in life. My father's attorneys strongly suspect that I had gambled and misspent that vast fortune, but I did well I think, and now there's nothing more I can do, or can I?"

"Why didn't you ever tell me about this before?"

"Why should I?"

And Beh looked a little hurt at my curt reply.

So I added "Why should one always speak about the things one does in life, unless it is because you feel you must share it with some one who is part of you. I have no one like that."

"Not even Judy?" Beh asked and I paused a little and thought and said "No, not even Judy."

And I thought a little longer and said "Anyway, not yet."

"What are you going to do about her?"

"I don't quite know myself. I feel for her almost like I felt for Ell, though not quite, because I have taken more from Judy in these months than I ever did from my wife. Judy has so much more to give because she is less of an individual and more like a faithful dog. And I can't analyze my own emotions. I know there's a place vacant again beside me, but I'm so afraid of the bullet in my chest, which I can never tell her about and which may start getting bad at any time. So what would be the use? I brought

to Elli a passport and a nationality and left her unidentified in a morgue. What is there I could be sure of doing for Judy? So you see we all have our responsibilities."

Beh was leaning his head on his uplifted right hand and I saw he glanced more than once at a picture on his table. It was the picture of his wife and child and then he stretched towards it and looked at it more closely and put it back.

I think I touched something in him that day, because when I was leaving, he asked me to come again that night to the house and he wouldn't have done that if he was still leaving by the evening train.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I SAW Judy after the dancing class early that evening. She didn't want me to come to Maxine's. She preferred that I should pick her up at the Little House in Nestle Lane. So I called for her there and the old servant woman was waiting for me on the steps and rushed upstairs at the sight of me and called Judy down.

Judy was very quiet I thought. She said she didn't feel well and wanted to be left home early. But I felt she was unhappy too and that there was something worrying her which she didn't want to tell me. I knew she hadn't eaten, so I suggested that we should go and eat at the Taj.

"I haven't seen you for days", I said, "let's celebrate tonight"

"No, thank you, not tonight. Besides, I don't want to make you feel ashamed"

"Ashamed? That's a silly thing to say. It annoys me and it hurts me too"

"I am sorry," she quickly replied "

But I must have been really annoyed with her, for I said "You know people like you bring things about"

“ Bring what about ? ”

“ Never mind,” I said to her curtly, but then I remembered why she had used the word ‘ashamed’ I remembered the story she had told me the night she first came and slept at the garret Her English boy friend—the man who had made her believe he was going to marry her—had never wanted to be seen with her in any place frequented by his own kind The Taj had given her a complex since then—a feeling of having been excluded from there In self-defence she had uttered the wrong word and now she felt a little foolish I looked at her sitting quiet and morose by my side and I felt bad when I realized I had lacked that understanding But I had spoken the words and couldn’t take them back The dialogue of life differs from the dialogue of a novel You can never retouch the spoken word

“ Look, Judy, I am a little nervous today Don’t take any notice of what I say ”

“ It’s all right,” she said, and she smiled, but it was a forced smile

There was a pause It was an awkward pause I thought of something to say But nothing came to my mind Judy broke the silence “ We are both out of mood Only at times like these I have my Cross and so nothing really hurts me And I know who gave it to me So a word or two that slips out doesn’t make any difference You have given me so much ” and here she threw her head up and gazed skywards, though there were no stars, and she paused

for a while and said . " . . a little too much I am afraid More than I could take "

And she looked at me quickly and leant forward and smacked my lips with hers as if she was pecking. And she shot away into her corner of the car.

" If I ever have to die on a road I am sure it will be face upwards, she said "

" What nonsense you talk Shut up, will you ? " I said, but playfully

" But it's true You wait and see. . . Let me drive your car "

" What, after that ominous remark ? No, thank you "

" Oh ! Don't be so silly Come on, I have never driven your car Let me "

" Can you drive ? "

" Of course I can Let me show you "

" Well, I don't like it, but I'll give it to you on the straight road before we get to the house "

" Scared ? "

" I don't know "

" Scared of what, anyway ? "

" Nothing Just that I didn't know you drove a car "

" You can only die once "

" But I'd like to chose a quieter death, if I had a choice "

" I'd like it to be quick and exciting Like Boice He died with headlines "

" Don't be so silly Do you think he wouldn't

have got his headlines if he had died in bed ? ”

“ Yes, he would have, but not everyone ”

“ All right, young lady,” I said jokingly, “ Make your will and choose your headliness ” And I gave her the car and she drove quite well to the garret along the long road that was the connecting link between my solitary abode and the city

“ And how do I drive ? ” she asked

“ Not badly In fact you surprise me, though a little rigid in style ”

“ That’s because it is too long for my legs ”

She put on the brakes and we got out and went up the two and a half flights of stairs

The Pir was laying out the decanter of whisky and the two glasses He *salaamed* Judy in his specially courteous way And after a little arrangement of ash-trays and odds and ends, he disappeared like a genie who evaporates into thin air

“ Look at that sunset,” I said as I looked across that vast stretch of pale—blue water that always lay at my feet “ See how it tinges everything with gold See that sky—it will change colour Watch it All the beauty in the world is here Beauty that is lasting, like an immortal love It’s not wrapped up with the sordidty of life or with pettiness There is no struggle about it It’s peaceful, far away from everything that is low and mean Far away from people and dirt and sweat There is something generous about it too It gives so much joy and never asks for anything in return Look at that rich pink

and that 'deep purple Where are you Mr Turner ? Where's your brush ? "

And Judy who was by my side, looked surprised, and sheepishly she asked " Who is Mr Turner ? "

" Turner ? " I knew it wouldn't mean anything to her, so what did it matter what I said ? I merely replied " He was a friend of mine He painted sunsets for me—long before I was born He died, but he left his sunsets behind—for me and so many others, who were his friends "

" Where are they ? "

" The sunsets ? "

" The pictures "

" Somewhere about the place They must be tucked away because of the war "

" You're queer," Judy said and there was a look of confusion on her face " So often I don't understand you I think you talk nonsense sometimes "

" That's not very kind," I said in a mock-serious way

" But I like listening to your voice "

" It's gone," I interrupted

" What's gone ? "

" The moment that was Mr Turner's "

And I don't think Judy understood what I meant But she didn't ask any questions

" Let's go in now," I said, "and draw the blinds How this A R P kills the joy of my living ! "

" But don't you realize we have got to protect ourselves from some stray raiders, for whom your light

might be a target ”

“ You’ve got to die once, didn’t you say ? ”

“ But not covered with rubble and under bricks and mortar ”

“ How would you like to die, Judy ? ”

“ I told you I want an exciting death Not painful though Not lingering I would like the world to stand still if only for a moment And then I’d like that there should be music played for me Like the Ave Maria Will you play it for me ? ”

“ Listen, Judy, we are getting morbid We shouldn’t talk like that Where are we going to eat ? ” I said changing the conversation “ We can’t eat here, because the Pir doesn’t expect us and he’d be disappointed if we asked him to produce something which he regarded unworthy of you ”

“ I am not hungry, are you ? ”

“ No, not hungry, but I could do with a little food ”

“ And I looked at her with a mischievous look in my eyes and I could feel that there was a cynical little smile on my face and I think my lower lip was giving me away, so I said, “ I am hungry, but not for food ”

And for the first time, Judy was a little embarrassed Till then she had been so nice and limp and soft in my arms, as we stood facing the open sea, which had lost its colour and had got submerged in the overwhelming darkness Now when I said this, she suddenly stiffened and stood uneasy and rigid, cold and emotionless, as if I had said something

wrong—something I shouldn't have said At that time I never understood her acting so strangely

But I let it pass

We came inside and I switched on the radio. Maybe it was to get some other voice to break the silence that followed my unanswered remark

Voice there were plenty Voices from all over the world Painful voices telling the story of the war in so many different languages Monotonous voices Bold voices Threatening voices

Now and again from the medley of languages you could decipher the odd word "Singapore" It was falling, falling, falling

The war was coming nearer to us

"But the city must be still asleep," I said to myself, remembering Sir Udal's words

"What are you listening to," Judy said after a while "What is that language?"

"It's the language of war, Judy I don't understand it"

"Then why do you listen to it?"

"I don't know," I said, "Don't ask me"

"Are you annoyed with me?", she asked

"No, Judy, I am not annoyed But I feel for the first time today that there is something wrong There is something between us which I don't understand I may be wrong, but that's how I feel"

And Judy went pale as a sheet I had never seen anyone change colour so quickly

"Come here," I said to her

She moved towards me

I was standing up, smoking a cigarette, and she looked so frightened as she came to me

"Come here," I said again, "don't look so frightened about nothing"

And she came closer

I took her in my arms

"Tell me, my darling, what is the matter? Are you hiding something from me?"

She didn't reply She just came closer and held me, her hands on my back and her head on my chest

"Don't hide your face I don't want to know anything you don't want to tell me"

And I could see she was getting more and more restless and agitated and mentally tortured, as if each remark of mine was cutting her deep inside

I kissed her jet black hair, the hair I always called "black flax" I could feel her deep breathing next to me Her heart-beats I could barely count, for they were beating so fast

She looked up Her neck stained She stood on her toes, her lips reaching for mine Her eyes were red

I bent my head down My lips were close to hers I waited for her to kiss me

She did I have never been kissed like that before Anguish Fear Pain Love All rolled up in one kiss

Then she snatched her head away, as if to pull herself together

"There is something between us," she said in a cold voice

I waited for her to say something more

"It's between us now Right now"

And as she said it, she pressed forward, I thought, though it may have been my imagination But not with her whole body, so much as with the part one would call the torso, specially the navel What she did wasn't crude, but it was a little embarrassing for me at that time

"What exactly do you mean, Judy?"

"Look, Nineteen Hundred, you must believe me I still love you very much"

"What do you mean by 'still love me'?"

"Whatever I have done, it's because I love you I know you want me today", and she didn't finish that sentence

I waited

She spoke again "You can always have me I am there for you to have But I can't have you, my love And you never told me"

We were now standing away from each other Face to face

"Don't talk in riddles to me Tell me straight, what is it?" I said

"I told you, remember, in the car this evening I said you have given me so much a little too much I am afraid more than I could take"

"For Christ's sake, Judy, speak out", and I think I raised my voice, but it was only due

to impatience

“ I have got a child a child that is yours and mine . . . so you see you gave me more than the cross . . and now I want both Both the child and the cross And I am going to have both Only not in the way I wanted it The child I mean But I did it because I loved and wanted something which was only yours ”

“ But why didn’t you tell me this before, ” I said, “ instead of keeping it to yourself and worrying about it ? Come here, you silly little girl ”

But she wouldn’t move from the spot

“ Come here, ” I said, and pulled her gently towards me Then I grabbed her in my arms for now she was mine She and her baby That was mine too And that moment in the excitement of becoming a father all of a sudden I began to see a little brat, already on the carpet at my feet, with hair like mine and not Judy’s And I was sure it was a son.

And then I paused and thought of the world that would change around me

San Cristobal !

Carmen with the rose and the comb in her hair !

Trixie under her lamp-post !

All those people on the boulevards of broken dreams !

“ All you people, ” I seemed to want to say loudly, “ all you people with whom I’ve lived these many years—come and see my son ”

The world was beautiful

Yes, the world was beautiful !

" My son, my son," I kept repeating to myself, holding Judy close to me, lest she, who had him now, should run away. And in the excitement, I almost forgot the woman who was to be his little mother.

" Child of love," I said loudly, and I kissed the woman in my arms again. But gently, so gently, lest I should hurt her or the child.

I was so scared.

" You seem so happy about it," Judy said.

" I am happy, Judy darling. I am so happy."

But I said it as if I was sad, because happiness like great sorrow often strikes you dumb, and I who could say so much at so many different moments in my life, didn't know what to say now—and this was, I felt at that time, the biggest moment of them all. Bigger than when I first met Judy. Bigger than any moment I had ever known.

" What about me?" Judy said, sadly.

" Silly girl! You will have the child and you can have me too. For you, to keep always."

Judy tore away from me.

" Why do you say that, when you know it's not true?"

" Not true? Why not?"

" I know about it. It's not your fault. I know you are married. I know you would have told me if you had the occasion. I believe you. You know that, don't you? I know there must have been some reason why you never broached that subject. It's probably the cause of your unhappiness. But it

doesn't worry me," and here her tone was so much sweeter, " and that's why I fixed it so that I could have the child and you could have me and the child would also have a father "

" You married ? "

" Yes, my darling, but only till I have the child And it's only for the child's sake I married Maxine three days ago That's why I have been avoiding you I didn't know how tell to you I didn't know where to begin or what to say I knew if I told you about it before I got married you'd never let me have the child And I wanted your child so much I wanted it at any cost And I knew you were not free to marry me "

" You fool ! " I said, and in that moment I was so damned annoyed And I showed my annoyance I threw the butt of the cigarette on the ground and stamped on it with my foot

" You silly fool ! " But this time there was no annoyance in my voice There was pathos So much sorrow

Pain

My soul ached

My world—my new world—was shattered

No son for me ?

No son I could show to all the world

Nobody would believe it was mine

San Cristobal would laugh if I told him

And I hated the thought of anyone laughing at anything about my child, doubting its parentage

I sat down ..

" What can I say, Judy ? Oh ! You fool Such a fool as I have never seen What made you so sure I couldn't marry you ? "

" I told you I know you are married I didn't try to pry into your private affairs, but I came here one morning and you were out It was the day I first knew I had a child I rushed here to tell you about it I was so excited myself You were not at home The Pir didn't know when you would be back I opened your drawer for some paper on which I could write you a small note And my eyes fell on the picture of a girl and I couldn't help reading what she had written I picked it up Something fell out of it I saw it was a marriage certificate I knew then I couldn't tell you what I had come to tell That's how I knew But it doesn't make any difference.... It's just my luck....fate yes, that's it.. .fate So I went to Maxine I knew Maxine would do anything for me I told him what had happened He told me it was wrong to do anything without asking you But I was never going to tell you, because I knew you would never have agreed And I didn't want a child without a father again Not this one My Johnnie will probably suffer enough But this time it would be a secret only you and I and Maxine would know "

" Go away, Judy Go away from me today "

And Judy looked afraid and puzzled at what I said

I looked up at her from where I was sitting and

said "I was married yes ..I was married I married a girl to give her a passport and a chance to live and a country she's dead has been dead seven years now.. why didn't you ask me ? How I hate you, you fool "

And I got up and rushed out to the verandah, because my eyes were watering and I didn't want her to see me like that I hated being thought soft, yet that was what I was, I suppose

It was so dark outside

Mr Turner's sunset had gone The rich pink and the deep purple Now there was just black darkness Black—the aristocrat of colours Black for sorrow Black for mourning How it suited the hour and the moment The stars hadn't come out yet Even they, at whom she used to gaze were ashamed to come out, and be seen by such a silly girl

I was in an unforgiving mood It's when you love something so much that you hate it too

And I said to myself once again as I had said before "Oh Judy, Judy, what have you done ? " I don't suppose it was her fault really Yet whom else could I blame ? I could blame myself Yet what for ? Or was it Nemesis that I, who had lived these last years aloof and distant from the world, should now fall into the vortex of it, into the midst of the very things I had avoided, right into the crucible of human suffering, as Beh had said Just when I wanted to belong to someone and wanted that someone should belong to me, and wanted at last to

break my aloofness, I was left to stew in my own juice
That was what was so bitter about that moment

And I reached for the decanter Pour'd myself
some whisky I remembered the doctor drinking
"It numbed the pain," he had said I would have to
drink so much to drown my sorrow and to numb
my pain

I took the glass in both my hands and drank in
gulpfulls, which was silly, but that's how I felt Then
I looked down - down below on the courtyard where
those Khoja men had gathered on the morning of the
funeral They were not there now Nor the Khoja
lady, I realized Nor even Mrs Felix D'Souza Nor
even the chant that came from down below Everything
had come in its time and had gone

Did I have to watch it all ?

And then I noticed the lights of a car down below
It began to move It was the black two-seater It
shot out of the gate, recklessly

I rushed into the room

"Judy!" I exclaimed "Judy!"

I knew she was gone

I became frantic Out again on the terrace I
came Watched those headlights of the black two-
seater shoot through the darkness She was moving
at a terrific speed

Now she was half-way across the long road that
lay between the garret and the city

I could hear a screech of brakes even from that
distance

There was a crash

I could almost feel that impact

The skid of tyres

Then a strange sound as of a rock rolling over

There were no headlights to be seen now.

Black darkness

Black for mourning, I was sure

I rushed downstairs Dashed into the doctor's flat

"Come quick, doctor," I yelled

The old man jumped in his chair

"As you are Take your bag and come quick"

The old man didn't say a word He did as he was told

"Where is she?" was all he asked

"On the road In my car I heard the crash"

"Let's take my car," he said, as we ran down the stairs "We'll get there sooner"

He started the old Morris Ten It sort of gasped and shook and then jerked and moved along

We didn't say much to each other

The faint lights of the doctor's car guided us through the dark night Now we could see in the distance a little crowd gathered and the doctor pulled up his car

I jumped out and rushed to the scene of the accident The black two-seater had left the road I pushed through the crowd From the edge of the road I could see, a little below, a mass of ugly wreckage that was once so elegant a car It had over-

turned. I jumped down Someone was holding a little lamp to show me the way

We moved over the hard rocks—towards the overturned car The light was faint, but it helped on that dark, black night The doctor had followed closely behind, his case in hand and still in his striped pyjamas, as I had found him

There was a sudden wail and a moan from the crowd as the light of the lamp fell on Judy's face

"A woman," I could hear them say "A young woman"

"Judy!" I cried, but she couldn't hear me
"Doctor Judy Doctor ."

I was kneeling down beside her, trying to feel her heart, her pulse I couldn't see her face It was so covered with blood

The doctor knelt down too He pulled the top of her dress apart and with his stethoscope he listened to her heart

I waited

I saw him grope all over for some heart-beat
I watched his face in the faint light of the lamp

He pulled out his torch from the bag He switched it on her eyes The eyelids he lifted, one by one

It was a horrid sight

Her face was mutilated Even swollen in parts

He didn't say a word He didn't do a thing to her after that

He just got up and I felt his hand on my shoulder

I saw him make the sign of the Cross

"No, no .doctor ..." I said, disbelieving
And again he made the sign of the Cross

Why did he do it twice, I wondered Could it
have been also for my son ? How would he know ?
I don't know what I thought or said at that time
I was going off my mind

"Can't you do anything .can't you try ? There
may still be life in her "

"My friend, she's dead But even if I had the
power to give her life I wouldn't now She was so
beautiful "

After that I didn't argue any more

I felt the chocking in my throat My brain
swam in my head

I looked up and I saw the stars had come out
So many of them now and I remembered how she
used to gaze skywards and to tell me she used to
feel afraid

I took the lamp from someone's hands. I
held it over her I couldn't see the face But
her right hand was clean and white and not a drop
of blood was on it And I brought the lamp towards
it and I saw she had clutched the little cross

I knew it was over then

I knew Judy was no more

I didn't disturb that hand I didn't dare to move
it from the Cross I kept kneeling there in the dark
the doctor standing beside me The lamp I had
put aside

I must have knelt there a long time before the police came, for my knees were sore

They took her away in the dark

I came with the doctor in his car, but I went upstairs alone I didn't let the doctor come up with me, though he wanted to so much

"A little later, doctor Not now Just let me be alone for a while Come up later I don't know what to do "

The Pir was at the door waiting for me I think he knew what had happened He saw it in my face I noticed his shoulder, as if it was braced up, ready to be lent to bear the coffin Sharing sorrow But this was mine alone I had lost both Judy and my son.

Outside on the verandah I went again and for the first time in my life I tried to sing It was for Judy. The *Ave Maria*. My voice was horrid It cracked, but I sang on I knew the words Music there was none

Gratia plena

God, how that hurt !

THE LAST CHAPTER

FOR two solid hours I stood alone and watched the night. As each moment passed it hurt more and more. It was not for the dead that I was sorry, so much as for the living—for myself in fact. I felt a sense of utter frustration—cheated of a happiness which I thought I had deserved. Yet, perhaps it was not deserved. Perhaps all these things had happened to make me eat my words about distant living—away from the lives of other people. Perhaps I had brought this upon myself and the gods had been kind to me, for it was I who had asked that the citadel that was myself should be inviolate. So Judy had to go out of my life that I may remain, as I had always wanted to remain—alone. And yet I didn't like it now. The attachment had grown too great. She was part of me. She bore that which was part of me too. And I wasn't quite sure which of these two losses was the greater—was it Judy or was it my son?

I don't think I had ever cried before, perhaps because I had never been touched before, perhaps because I always felt it was ungainly for a man to cry.

But that night I think I did and never thought how ugly I must have looked I got resigned to it, as if it was just the reaction of a gland It gave me a new feeling of being reborn It kindled in me a new spark—something that took me close to humanity, as if all other people whom I had never seen or known were my kith and kin, and I realized what it must have been for others to feel that suffering too For a few moments I even felt ashamed, because I thought of my cold feelings when the Khoja lady had died and how at that time I had told Judy that I didn't want to get involved in the lives of others But I knew for sure that had the Khoja lady been alive, she would have felt more for Judy and me than I had felt for her So I cried not only for Judy and my son but for all the people for whom I should have cried and never did I was like a man who was in debt all round, and who had won a large sweepstake and had called a meeting of his creditors to pay them off At least Judy's death did that much for me I was clear of all my emotional debts In those two hours, alone with my thoughts, I was squaring myself with the world.

Then the doctor came He was so practical He asked me questions about the funeral and about her people and her son I had almost forgotten about Johnnie Poor kid, how he had got washed away in my thoughts, which were preoccupied with my son. Perhaps it would have been unfair to Johnnie had my son been born That also might

have been the reason why the gods decided he should not be born This inscrutable working of fate was uncanny And then there was Maxine, of whom the doctor didn't know, and who was after all her husband and would have to be informed of his wife's death And then I would have to tell Beh and Suni, for they were my friends and I had promised to go over to them that evening

This much I knew that I would never go to the funeral I couldn't bear the thought of walking behind the cortege and partaking in the ritual of offering her to the worms It sounded horrid The doctor spoke to me about the courtesies of life and of paying respect to the dead, but it didn't change my mind He then volunteered to make the arrangements himself and I gave him Maxine's address and said he was her nearest relative, leaving it to Maxine to clarify the position if it was necessary I knew I was a cad, for leaving others to do what I think I should have done myself, but I thought differently at that time and even now I am not clear about my duties I only knew that I had to do one thing and it was to get Johnnie and to find him a new home, either with myself or with Maxine and to be sure he would get all that which his mother would have liked him to have and for which she had given up first her body and now her life For me Johnnie was Judy now And through the doctor I sent Maxine a message asking if he would mind if I tried to look after Johnnie for him and also to forgive me for not seeing him now

Somehow I knew Maxine would understand I don't know why I presumed that other people would accommodate themselves to my needs and to my philosophy of living This was what I could never understand about myself I laid down the law and somehow others did as I told them So that I felt myself justified in what I did—justified in the eyes of man at any rate I think I must have been obsessed with an idea that I had a higher morality, every time my actions conflicted with the unwritten code of social intercourse.

I don't remember much of that night or how the hours fled The doctor had left me to myself alone when he went into the city to make arrangements for Judy's funeral All night I sat out, watching the night .

Then came the dawn.

I went out of the house early As if by instinct I went to the garage for the black two-seater and found it was no longer there And I walked till an early morning bus picked me up on the long road, that led to the city It moved slowly and as we passed the wreckage which was once the black two-seater, I saw the workmen in the bus look out and heard them mutter something to each other Only one old man was unaffected by what he saw He was too busy blowing his nose to care about what had happened. And he annoyed me with his indifference, but I knew that was exactly what I too would have done had the two-seater not been mine and if those

" Who has gone ? " he naively asked
But I couldn't give him an answer
As I left, Maxine said " See you at the cemetery ",
as if we were going to the pictures

As we drove back to the garret in a taxi,
I stopped at Beh's house

He was just getting dressed to go to the office
Suni was at the breakfast table, with Dulı in her hands,
and so different from the day before, so full of that
happiness which I felt she almost owed to me

I waited for Beh to come into the dining-room
before I said anything He came immediately Suni
didn't ask me who the little man was that was
holding my hand We were both watching Dulı
and Johnnie exchange glances at each other shyly
and were a little amused at what we saw.

" Well, good morning, everybody," Beh said
bursting into the room " Why didn't you turn up
last night ? We have a visitor I see "

And he leant over and said " What is your
name, young man ? "

And the little man replied " My name is Johnnie
My mother's name is Judy "

And that meant a lot to both Suni and Beh

" And where is your mother ? " Beh continued

" I don't know," Johnnie said, " I haven't seen
her this morning "

I felt very awful but I saw the newspaper on
the table and I picked it up and turned to the obscure
little paragraph and gave it to Beh Beh read it and

gave it to Suni. She was startled at first and then Beh said "I am really sorry"

He had a sip of coffee and I saw he couldn't touch his food Suni noticed it too, but she didn't insist

"It's so difficult to know what to say I am so sorry Almost as if I had lost something myself," he said with a vacant look in his eyes

And that tense moment would have been unbearable, but something strange happened to relieve it Duli got up from her mother's lap and as if on an impulse she went out of the room and returned in a few moments with a bottle of sweets which she offered to Johnnie And Johnnie was a little shy, then looked at me for confirmation and when I nodded, he said "Thank you" and put one in his mouth And I think they ran out into the other room to play.

We talked a little while together Suni and Beh and I I told them what had happened All except that which was my own little secret, shared now with Maxine alone—Maxine who was going to see me at the cemetery

I realized it was getting late for Beh and said I would call another time And they didn't press me to stay because they knew I wasn't in the mood

The taxi was waiting for me

"Where is Johnnie?" I asked, as I was leaving, having almost forgotten him for a moment

"Let him stay here....at least for a little while .. I'll look after him," Suni said spontaneously and Beh looked at her somewhat surprised and then he put his

arm around her and he said "We'll look after him
I'd like it too "

And I left it at that

I went back to the garret alone

I slept for a long while Then the Pir woke me
up It was about five in the evening

" What is it?" I asked, because I saw him
agitated

And he pointed to the road and I jumped out of
bed, still bleary-eyed and I saw a little black hearse
and a few cars purring down the long road that came
from the city I recognized Beh's car, but the others
were just taxis

I stood and watched this grim procession pass

The world had stood still, it seemed, and there was
not a sound to be heard

The silence drove me crazy and I knew how much
Judy wanted that when she died, there should be
music

And I tried to get it for her on the radio and the
music came

Somewhere a far off voice was singing for her
For her and for me.

I recognised it It was the *aria* of the Countess
from Mozart's Figaro

Dove sono i bei momenti

And in my heart those words were written even
as I knew Judy would like them on her grave

Where have fled those joyous moments?

Judy's cortege passed and the song faded away.

I still stood on the verandah, all alone by myself.
The voice on the radio changed....

" This is London calling... ...Singapore...."

I knew then that Singapore was shorn to Shonan

" What the hell do I care ? " I said loudly to
myself and switched it off

For as I looked across I knew there still lay the
city before me

And near my heart I felt a pain, but I think
it was just the lead moving again.